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Characterizing the initial state and dynamical evolution in XeXe and PbPb collisions using multiparticle cumulants

The CMS Collaboration*

Abstract

For the first time, correlations among mixed-order moments of two or three flow harmonics — (v_n^k, v_m^l) and (v_n^k, v_m^l, v_p^q) , with k, l , and q denoting the respective orders—are measured in xenon–xenon (XeXe) collisions and compared with lead–lead (PbPb) results, providing a novel probe of collective behavior in heavy ion collisions. These measurements compare a nearly spherical, doubly-magic ^{208}Pb nucleus to a triaxially deformed ^{129}Xe nucleus, emphasizing the sensitivity to dynamic nuclear deformation. The dependence of these results (v_n , $n = 2, 3, 4$) on the shape and size of the nuclear overlap region is studied. Comparisons between v_2 , v_3 , and v_4 demonstrate the importance of v_3 and v_4 in exploring the nonlinear hydrodynamic response of the quark-gluon plasma (QGP) to the initial spatial anisotropy. The results constrain initial-state model parameters that influence the evolution of the QGP. The CMS detector was used to collect XeXe and PbPb data at nucleon-nucleon center-of-mass energies of $\sqrt{s_{\text{NN}}} = 5.44$ and 5.36 TeV, respectively. Correlations are extracted using multiparticle mixed-harmonic cumulants (up to eight-particle cumulants) with charged particles in the pseudorapidity range $|\eta| < 2.4$ and transverse momentum range $0.5 < p_T < 3$ GeV/c.

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1 Introduction

High energy heavy ion collisions at the LHC create a hot and dense state of strongly interacting matter known as the quark–gluon plasma (QGP) [1, 2]. The anisotropic shape of the overlap region between the two colliding nuclei generates pressure gradients that drive a collective anisotropic expansion of the medium. This collective behavior, known as anisotropic flow, is quantified through a Fourier decomposition of the single-particle azimuthal distribution of produced particles [3]:

$$\frac{dN}{d\phi} = \frac{1}{2\pi} \left[1 + 2 \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} v_n \cos n(\phi - \psi_n) \right], \quad (1)$$

where ϕ is the azimuthal angle of an outgoing particle, ψ_n denotes the n th-harmonic symmetry plane, and v_n is the n th flow harmonic. The coefficients v_2 , v_3 , and v_4 correspond to elliptic, triangular, and quadrangular flow, respectively. These harmonics carry information about the initial spatial anisotropy and the subsequent medium response.

Event-by-event fluctuations in the positions of nucleons within the colliding nuclei lead to variations in the initial energy density, causing flow harmonics to fluctuate on an event-by-event basis. These fluctuations are studied through higher-order cumulants of the flow coefficients (v_n^k , $k > 1$). While second-order cumulants of a single flow harmonic and two-harmonic correlations are well explored [4, 5], they are insensitive to non-Gaussian features of the flow probability distribution [6]. The study of mixed-order cumulants (correlations between different harmonics and orders, v_n^k and v_m^l , with $n \neq m$ and $k \neq l$) provides sensitivity to the nonlinear hydrodynamic response of the QGP. A purely linear response results in v_n scaling linearly with the corresponding initial-state eccentricity ε_n , which quantifies the transverse shape anisotropy of the collision zone immediately after impact [6].

In addition to initial-state fluctuations, the intrinsic shape of the colliding nuclei influences the initial geometry of the overlap region and, consequently, the observed flow. The doubly magic lead (^{208}Pb) nuclei are nearly spherical, whereas xenon (^{129}Xe) nuclei are triaxially deformed. This study therefore probes dynamic nuclear deformation, which captures event-by-event variations in the nucleon configuration during the collision, rather than the static ground-state shapes measured in low-energy nuclear physics experiments [7]. Following the parameterization used for low-energy nuclear physics studies, the nuclear density distribution is described using the Woods-Saxon formula:

$$\rho(r, \theta) = \frac{\rho_0}{1 + \exp[(r - R(\theta))/a_0]} \quad (2)$$

where r is the radial distance from the center of the nucleus, θ is the polar angle relative to the symmetry axis, ρ_0 is the central density at $r = 0$, and a_0 is the nuclear skin depth. For a deformed nucleus, the radial term $R(\theta)$ includes angular dependence via spherical harmonics:

$$R(\theta) = R_0 [1 + \beta_2 Y_{20}(\theta) + \beta_4 Y_{40}(\theta)] \quad (3)$$

where R_0 is the mean nuclear radius, β_2 and β_4 are the quadrupole and hexadecapole deformation parameters, respectively, and $Y_{\ell 0}(\theta)$ are the spherical harmonics.

This Letter presents a comprehensive study of multiparticle cumulants involving one, two, and three flow harmonics, including mixed higher-order correlations between different harmonics. The analysis is based on data collected with the CMS detector for XeXe and PbPb collisions at nucleon-nucleon center-of-mass energies of $\sqrt{s_{\text{NN}}} = 5.44$ and 5.36 TeV, respectively. The XeXe and PbPb data were recorded in 2017 and 2023, respectively, and correspond to integrated

luminosities of $3.42 \mu\text{b}^{-1}$ [8–10] and 1.92nb^{-1} . The key goals of this study are: (i) to investigate the effects of nuclear deformation on flow correlations using XeXe and PbPb comparisons, and (ii) to probe the nonlinear hydrodynamic response of the QGP using higher-order moments of v_n . The results are compared to a range of theoretical models to constrain the initial-state geometry and the transport properties of the QGP formed in heavy ion collisions at the LHC. Tabulated results for this analysis can be accessed in the HEPdata record [11].

2 The CMS detector

The CMS detector is centered around a superconducting solenoid with an internal diameter of 6 m, generating a 3.8 T magnetic field [12, 13]. Within the solenoid volume reside a silicon pixel and strip tracker, a lead tungstate crystal electromagnetic calorimeter (ECAL), and a brass-and-scintillator hadron calorimeter (HCAL), each composed of a barrel and two endcap sections. Forward calorimeters extend the pseudorapidity (η) coverage of the barrel and endcap detectors. Muons are identified using gas-ionization chambers embedded in the steel flux-return yoke outside the solenoid. The hadron forward (HF) calorimeters, positioned symmetrically 11.2 m from the interaction region, cover the range $3.0 < |\eta| < 5.2$ and also serve as luminosity monitors. These HF calorimeters use steel absorbers and quartz fibers as sensitive material, are azimuthally segmented into 20° modular wedges, and form towers of size 0.175×0.175 in $(\Delta\eta \times \Delta\phi)$. The silicon tracker, consisting of 1856 silicon pixel and 15 148 silicon strip detector modules, measures charged particles within $|\eta| < 2.4$. For nonisolated particles with transverse momentum $1 < p_T < 10 \text{ GeV}/c$ and $|\eta| < 1.4$, the typical track momentum resolution is 1.5%, and the transverse (longitudinal) impact parameter resolution ranges from 25–90 (45–150) μm . The CMS detector response is simulated in detail using GEANT4 [14].

3 Event and track selections

Events from XeXe collisions are selected at the hardware level (level-1) by requiring the presence of both colliding bunches at the nominal interaction point [15]. A minimum energy deposit is required in at least one HF calorimeter tower, optimized to maximize event acceptance while suppressing noise from electromagnetic scattering and pileup (multiple interactions in a single bunch crossing). Pileup is negligible because the average number of collisions per bunch crossing is 0.018. At the high-level trigger [16], at least one reconstructed track in the pixel detector is required. Offline event selection further requires a minimum energy deposit of 3 GeV in each of at least three HF towers on both sides of the detector, to enhance selection of hadronic collisions and suppress ultraperipheral electromagnetic interactions. Events must contain a reconstructed primary vertex with at least two tracks, and located within 15 cm along the beam axis and 0.2 cm transversely relative to the nominal collision region. To reduce beam-gas interaction contamination, events with more than ten tracks must have at least 25% of tracks meeting high-purity quality criteria [12]. The overall event selection efficiency for hadronic events is approximately 95%. Track reconstruction follows algorithms similar to those used in proton-proton collisions [12].

For PbPb collisions, a cluster shape filter in the pixel detector ensures compatibility with particles originating from the primary vertex. The pileup rate is negligible (on average 0.0005 collisions per bunch crossing). Events are selected by requiring energy deposits of at least 4 GeV in two HF towers on both sides of the interaction point, favoring hadronic collisions. The same vertex location criteria as in XeXe data are used. Track reconstruction for the PbPb data utilizes a deep neural network algorithm trained with input variables including normalized χ^2 per

degrees of freedom, p_T resolution, and number of hits in the silicon pixel and strip detectors, based on conditions of the CMS detector from the reconstruction of earlier 2018 PbPb data [15].

In both the XeXe and PbPb systems, the analysis is restricted to primary charged particle tracks with $|\eta| < 2.4$ and $0.5 < p_T < 3.0$ GeV/c. For XeXe data, tracks are required to have impact parameter significances with respect to the primary vertex less than three standard deviations in both the beam direction (d_z) and the transverse plane (d_0), as well as a relative p_T uncertainty $\sigma_{p_T}/p_T < 10\%$. For PbPb data, the neural-network-based reconstruction imposes requirements on d_z and d_0 similar to those used for XeXe data.

In this Letter, all observables are presented as functions of centrality, which is related to the degree of geometric overlap of the two colliding nuclei. The centrality percentage represents the fraction of the total inelastic hadronic cross section. A 0% centrality corresponds to a fully head-on collision, while higher centrality percentages indicate more peripheral collisions with smaller overlap. Experimentally, centrality is determined using the percentiles of the energy deposited in the HF calorimeters [17].

4 Analysis techniques

The two-particle correlation and multiparticle cumulant methods are discussed in Ref. [15]. In the two-particle correlation analyses, a charged particle from one p_T interval (the “trigger” particle) is paired with all of the remaining charged particles from the same p_T interval (the “associated” particles).

For a given trigger particle, the pairing is performed in two-dimensional (2D) bins of differences in η and azimuthal angle ($\Delta\eta, \Delta\phi$). The signal and mixed-event distributions are defined as the per-trigger-particle yield of pairs in the same or mixed events:

$$\begin{aligned} S(\Delta\eta, \Delta\phi) &= \frac{1}{N_{\text{trig}}} \frac{d^2 N^{\text{same}}}{d\Delta\eta d\Delta\phi} \\ M(\Delta\eta, \Delta\phi) &= \frac{1}{N_{\text{trig}}} \frac{d^2 N^{\text{mixed}}}{d\Delta\eta d\Delta\phi} \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

where N^{same} (N^{mixed}) is the number of same- (mixed-) event particle pairs in a given $(\Delta\eta, \Delta\phi)$ bin and N_{trig} is the number of trigger particles.

The mixed-event distribution is used to estimate the random combinatorial background and is constructed by pairing trigger particles in an event with associated particles from ten other randomly chosen events. Events are considered for mixing only if they belong to the same centrality bin (with a bin width of 5% or 10%) and the difference in their primary vertex locations along the beam axis is less than 2 cm.

The per-trigger-particle associated yield used to extract the v_n coefficients is found by normalizing the ratio of the signal and mixed-event distributions:

$$\frac{1}{N_{\text{trig}}} \frac{d^2 N^{\text{pair}}}{d\Delta\eta d\Delta\phi} = M(0,0) \frac{S(\Delta\eta, \Delta\phi)}{M(\Delta\eta, \Delta\phi)} \quad (5)$$

where $M(0,0)$ is the mixed-event value at $(\Delta\eta, \Delta\phi) = (0,0)$. This 2D normalized yield is then projected onto $\Delta\phi$ before fitting to a Fourier expansion. A selection of $|\Delta\eta| > 2$ is applied to

suppress short-range nonflow correlations such as jets [18]. The fitting is done using:

$$\frac{1}{N_{\text{trig}}} \frac{dN^{\text{pair}}}{d\Delta\phi} = \frac{N_{\text{assoc}}}{2\pi} \left(1 + \sum_n 2V_{n\Delta} \cos(n\Delta\phi) \right) \quad (6)$$

where N_{assoc} is the number of associated particles in the selected kinematic interval, and $V_{n\Delta}$ denotes the n th Fourier coefficient.

Under the factorization assumption [19], $V_{n\Delta}(\mathbf{p}_T^a, \mathbf{p}_T^b) = v_n(\mathbf{p}_T^a) v_n(\mathbf{p}_T^b)$, and for trigger and associated particles from the same p_T range, the n th flow harmonic is extracted as:

$$v_n\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\} = \sqrt{V_{n\Delta}} \quad (7)$$

where the first "2" in the v_n variable list refers to flow harmonics from two-particle correlations.

Multiparticle correlations involving four or more particles are studied with the Q -cumulant method [20], which incorporates track-by-track weights to correct for detector acceptance and efficiency [21]. This method allows the computation of cumulants that probe genuine multiparticle azimuthal correlations while suppressing nonflow contributions.

Four-particle symmetric cumulants (SC) measure correlations between the squared flow coefficients of two different harmonics, n and m :

$$\begin{aligned} \text{SC}(n, m) &= \langle\langle \cos[n(\phi_1 - \phi_2)] \rangle\rangle \langle\langle \cos[m(\phi_1 - \phi_2)] \rangle\rangle \\ &\quad - \langle\langle \cos(n\phi_1 + m\phi_2 - n\phi_3 - m\phi_4) \rangle\rangle \\ &= \langle v_n^2 \rangle \langle v_m^2 \rangle - \langle v_n^2 v_m^2 \rangle. \end{aligned} \quad (8)$$

where $\langle\langle \dots \rangle\rangle$ denotes an average performed in two steps: (i) first over all particles within a single event, and (ii) then over all events [20]. This technique, originally introduced in Ref. [22], follows the same framework as described in Ref. [21]. The SC observable isolates correlations between fluctuations of flow harmonics beyond trivial statistical fluctuations. Similarly, symmetric cumulants of six particles [$\text{SC}(k, l, m)$] involve combinations of the second orders of three different v_n coefficients [23].

Higher-order mixed harmonic cumulants (MHC) involving six or eight particles, also called m -observable cumulants [24] and first studied in Ref. [18], provide further suppression of nonflow correlations and probe the nonlinear hydrodynamic response and mode-coupling effects between different flow harmonics with enhanced sensitivity [18, 24]. For example, the six-particle MHC involving v_2^4 and v_3^2 is defined as:

$$\text{MHC}(v_2^4, v_3^2) = \langle v_2^4 v_3^2 \rangle - 4 \langle v_2^2 v_3^2 \rangle \langle v_2^2 \rangle - \langle v_2^4 \rangle \langle v_3^2 \rangle + 4 \langle v_2^2 \rangle^2 \langle v_3^2 \rangle. \quad (9)$$

By construction, an m -particle cumulant removes contributions from correlations involving fewer than m particles, thereby reducing contamination from nonflow sources such as jets or resonance decays even further. Similar cumulants can be defined for combinations of different orders of v_2 and v_3 , and also v_2 and v_4 , following the prescription in Ref. [18].

To enable more direct comparisons between different collision systems and between data and theoretical calculations, normalized cumulants are used. The normalized four- and six-particle symmetric cumulants (NSC) are defined as:

$$\text{NSC}(n, m) = \frac{\text{SC}(n, m)}{\langle v_n^2 \rangle \langle v_m^2 \rangle} \quad (10)$$

$$\text{NSC}(k, l, m) = \frac{\text{SC}(k, l, m)}{\langle v_k^2 \rangle \langle v_l^2 \rangle \langle v_m^2 \rangle}. \quad (11)$$

These normalizations improve the comparison between different initial-particle systems and with theoretical predictions by removing dependencies on the magnitudes of the flow coefficients which can depend, for example, on the average p_T . The normalized MHC (nMHC) scale the MHC by the average flow coefficients as:

$$\text{nMHC}(v_m^k, v_n^l) = \frac{\text{MHC}(v_m^k, v_n^l)}{\langle v_m^k \rangle \langle v_n^l \rangle} \quad (12)$$

$$\text{nMHC}(v_m^k, v_n^l, v_p^q) = \frac{\text{MHC}(v_m^k, v_n^l, v_p^q)}{\langle v_m^k \rangle \langle v_n^l \rangle \langle v_p^q \rangle}. \quad (13)$$

All cumulants are calculated using a $|\Delta\eta| > 2$ selection in the two-particle correlations entering the denominators of the normalized cumulants, further reducing residual nonflow effects.

The full mathematical details and further discussion of these methods can be found in Refs. [15, 18, 20].

5 Systematic uncertainties

Systematic uncertainties are evaluated from four main sources for both XeXe and PbPb collisions. Only the maximum relative uncertainties across all observables are quoted below, with the largest values found for measurements involving v_4 . In the following, percentage uncertainties are listed for XeXe collisions first, followed by the value for PbPb collisions. First, the track selection criteria are varied by comparing results using tighter (impact parameter significance < 2 standard deviations, relative p_T uncertainty $< 5\%$) and looser (5 standard deviations and 15%) selections, resulting in maximum uncertainties of 6 and 5%. Second, uncertainties from the primary vertex position are estimated by comparing results with vertex positions along the beam axis in the ranges $|z_{\text{vtx}}| < 3$ cm and $3 < |z_{\text{vtx}}| < 15$ cm, yielding uncertainties up to 6 and 5% in the centrality range 0–10%. Third, centrality calibration uncertainties, assessed by varying event selection criteria [15], contribute up to 6 and 3% in peripheral events. Finally, discrepancies between original track distributions generated by the HYDJET model [25] and those obtained after full detector simulation, reconstruction, and efficiency corrections produce systematic uncertainties up to 9 and 5%. The centrality dependence of these uncertainties varies with the analysis method: in two-particle correlations, the largest uncertainties appear in central collisions (9% for $v_4\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$), while in multiparticle cumulants, the maximum relative uncertainty is about 6% in mid-central to peripheral collisions. Overall, the various v_n coefficients show consistent systematic trends, with partial cancellation in the cumulant results due to correlations between numerator and denominator terms.

6 Description of the models

The IP-GLASMA initial-condition (IC) model is an event generator incorporating event-by-event geometric and subnucleonic quantum fluctuations through dependencies on the impact parameter and the longitudinal momentum fraction x , where x denotes the fraction of a nucleon's momentum carried by a quark or gluon in a high energy scattering process [26]. This modeling captures the fluctuating color charge configurations in ultrarelativistic nuclear collisions. The model has been shown to accurately reproduce experimental features of odd flow harmonics, particularly v_3 , which are known to be dominated by initial-state fluctuations [26].

The full IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD framework [27] builds upon the fluctuating initial states from IP-GLASMA-IC by incorporating hydrodynamic evolution using MUSIC [28], a second-order relativistic viscous hydrodynamic program. The MUSIC simulation employs a fixed specific shear viscosity to entropy density ratio $\eta/s = 0.12$ and a temperature-dependent bulk viscosity $\zeta/s(T)$ for the QGP phase until hadronization. Afterward, resonance decays and hadronic rescattering are simulated with URQMD [29] until kinetic freeze-out.

For this analysis, four sets of Woods–Saxon deformation parameters for Xe and one set for Pb are used. These deformation parameters originate from both theoretical calculations and empirical studies, and were provided by the authors of Ref. [26]. They are intended to span a representative range of plausible nuclear deformations for the Xe nuclei and are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Woods–Saxon parameters used to model the nuclear density distributions for the ^{129}Xe nucleus in four different deformation configurations and for the ^{208}Pb nucleus. The parameters R_0 , a_0 , β_2 , and β_4 are defined in Eq. (3).

Nucleus	R_0 (fm)	a_0 (fm)	β_2	β_4
Xe (a)	5.601	0.492	0.207	−0.003
Xe (b)	5.420	0.570	0.000	−0.003
Xe (c)	5.420	0.570	0.162	−0.003
Xe (d)	5.420	0.570	0.207	−0.003
Pb	6.647	0.537	0.006	0.000

The TRENTO-IC model [30] is a nondynamical initial-state model that does not assume any specific physical mechanisms for entropy production, pre-equilibrium dynamics, or thermalization. It deposits entropy in proportion to the generalized (typically geometric) mean of the nuclear overlap density between the colliding nuclei. This model directly yields the initial-state eccentricities ε_n used in hydrodynamic modeling. Eccentricities for XeXe collisions are found using only two sets of deformation parameters, Xe (a) for deformed and Xe (b) for spherical configurations.

7 Results

7.1 Sensitivity to nuclear deformation of the Xe nucleus

Figure 1 presents the 2-particle correlation results for $v_n\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ with $n = 2, 3$ (results for $n = 4$ are in Appendix A.1) as a function of centrality for XeXe and PbPb collisions. The upper, middle, and lower rows show the v_n values, comparisons of model predictions to the data, and the ratios of the hydrodynamic model predictions to the data, respectively. Both flow harmonics exhibit larger values in XeXe events than in PbPb data for more central collisions (lower centrality percentages), but smaller values in peripheral collisions. This enhancement of v_2 in central XeXe collisions is likely driven by the quadrupole deformation of the Xe nucleus, while the larger v_3 compared to PbPb indicates stronger initial-state density fluctuations in XeXe [31].

The middle row of Fig. 1 compares the XeXe/PbPb ratios to IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD and TRENTO-IC model predictions. The IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD hydrodynamic predictions are given for four Xe nuclear shape parameter sets [26], with statistical uncertainties shown as shaded bands. The TRENTO-IC model predictions assume that the v_n ratios are proportional to the corresponding initial-state eccentricities ε_n . The predictions are displayed

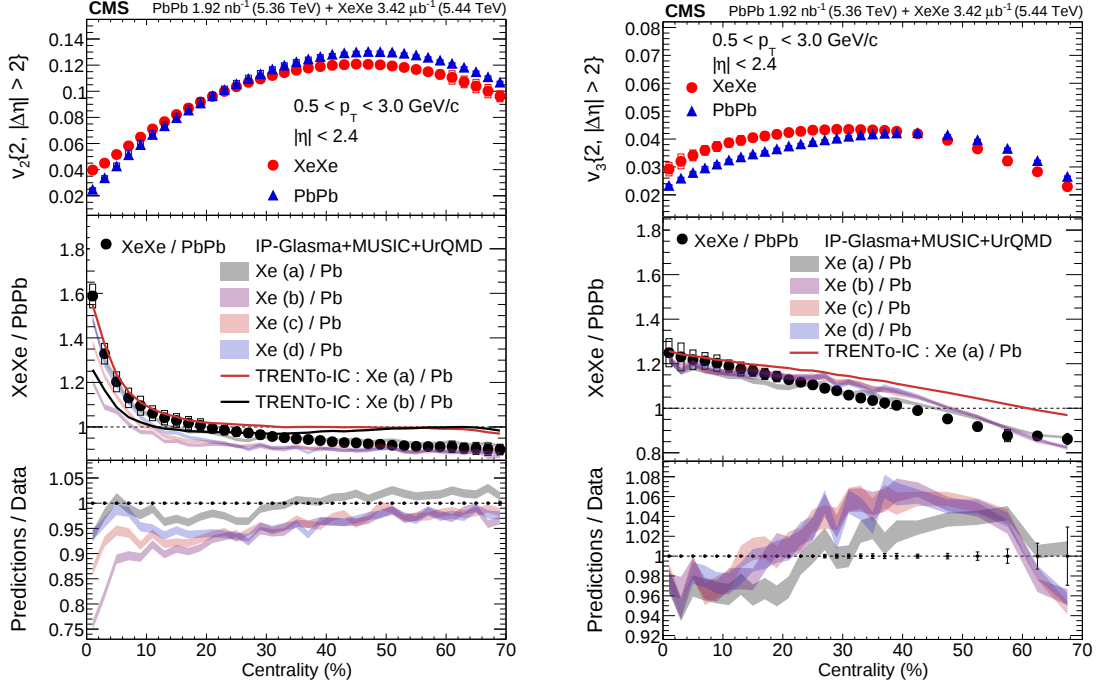


Figure 1: The upper row shows $v_n\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ for elliptic ($n = 2$, left) and triangular ($n = 3$, right) flow, as a function of centrality in XeXe and PbPb collisions, calculated using the 2-particle correlation method. The vertical bars (mostly smaller than the marker size) and the open boxes represent the statistical and systematic uncertainties, respectively. The middle row compares various theoretical predictions to the data for the XeXe/PbPb ratios. The red and black solid lines show predictions using ratios of the initial-state eccentricities ε_n from the TRENTo-IC model using deformed (Xe (a)) and spherical (Xe (b)) parameters, respectively, both taken as ratios with respect to the Pb nucleus. The shaded bands represent four different hydrodynamic predictions from the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD model using four Xe parameter sets. The lower row shows the ratios of the hydrodynamic predictions to data.

in Fig. 1 for v_2 using the Xe (a) and (b) sets, but only with the Xe (a) set for v_3 due to its insensitivity to deformation. For a clearer comparison, the lower row in Fig. 1 displays the ratios of the hydrodynamic model predictions to data. Ratios are not shown for the TRENTo-IC model because it gives a very poor overall description of the data.

For the hydrodynamic model with parameter set (a), the largest value of the quadrupole deformation β_2 gives the best agreement for v_2 with a reduced $\chi^2 \approx 0.99$, compared to values from 4.6 to 8.5 for the other sets. Set (d), having the same β_2 as set (a) but a larger value for the nuclear skin depth a_0 , fits slightly better than sets (b) or (c) for the 0–10% most central events ($\chi^2 \approx 4.6$, as opposed to values of about 8.5 and 5.0 for sets (b) and (c), respectively). For v_3 , set (a) also fits best ($\chi^2 \approx 1.7$, compared to $\chi^2 > 4$ for the others) for the 20–70% centrality region, but is comparable or even slightly worse in other centrality regions.

The TRENTo-IC model gives a poor description of v_2 for peripheral events (beyond about 35–40% centrality) and fails to match v_3 overall (except for extremely central collisions). Both discrepancies are likely due to viscous damping effects, which are stronger in the smaller XeXe system [31]. However, for v_2 in the 0–20% centrality region, which is more sensitive to deformation, the predictions using the deformed Xe (a) parameters show better agreement with the

data. In fact, this agreement is comparable to that for the hydrodynamic model using the same Xe parameter set.

Differences between models and data may arise from multiple factors. Integrated flow harmonics can be over or underestimated due to differences in the p_T ranges, affecting extraction of QGP transport coefficients $[\eta/s, \zeta/s(T)]$ [32]. The IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD simulations use $\eta/s = 0.12$, but theoretical uncertainties remain. The models also assume values of zero for both the octupole deformation (β_3) and triaxiality (γ) parameters, the latter describing deviations from axial symmetry. However, recent studies suggest that Xe nuclei exhibit large deformation fluctuations due to a second-order phase transition along the Xe isotope chain [33], which these models do not account for. Uncertainties in freeze-out criteria further impact predicted flow observables, contributing to discrepancies and uncertainties in extracting the dynamic Xe deformation parameters. In addition, in peripheral collisions, contributions from non-thermalized or pp-like (core—corona) events may influence the measured correlations, effects which are not fully captured by the hydrodynamic models [34].

The observable $v_n\{4\}/v_n\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$, where $v_n\{4\}$ refers to the four-particle cumulant of v_n , provides direct information about event-by-event fluctuations of v_n [31]. If v_n fluctuates between events, this ratio is smaller than 1. The values of $v_2\{4\}/v_2\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ exhibit a strong centrality dependence, as shown in the upper left plot of Fig. 2, with the largest deviation from unity occurring in more central events. The systematically larger deviations from unity in XeXe compared to PbPb events indicate larger elliptic flow fluctuations in XeXe collisions. These trends are also observed in both the initial-state TRENTO-IC and hydrodynamic IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD predictions. In Ref. [32], this observable was shown to be sensitive to a_0 . To further investigate this sensitivity, the double ratio of XeXe to PbPb values for $v_2\{4\}/v_2\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ is shown in the lower left plot of Fig. 2. The theoretical predictions using parameter set Xe (a) with $a_0 = 0.492$ more closely match the data than set (d) with $a_0 = 0.570$, reinforcing the conclusion based on $v_2\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ alone. In the following discussion, the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD predictions for XeXe collisions will use only parameter set Xe (a), which provides the closest match to data. For higher-order cumulants, all parameter sets remain compatible within the uncertainties.

7.2 Nonlinear hydrodynamic response through higher-order moments of flow harmonics

The upper left plot in Fig. 2 also shows that the ratios $\varepsilon_2\{4\}/\varepsilon_2\{2\}$ from TRENTO-IC (solid lines) exceed the corresponding v_2 ratios in more peripheral collisions, indicating a nonlinear hydrodynamic response that increases towards peripheral collisions [6]. This effect is more pronounced in XeXe collisions (starting from around a 30% centrality, as opposed to a 50% centrality in PbPb collisions), suggesting stronger nonlinearity in the smaller XeXe system. The same nonlinear response is also observed in the upper right plot of Fig. 2, where the predictions from TRENTO-IC for $\varepsilon_3\{4\}/\varepsilon_3\{2\}$ (solid lines) exceed the corresponding v_3 ratios. In contrast to what was seen for v_2 , the values of $v_3\{4\}/v_3\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ for both the predictions and the data are closer to unity for XeXe than for PbPb collisions. Finite-size corrections to the central limit theorem, which induce non-Gaussian fluctuations in the initial triangularity ε_3 , were predicted to result in an $A^{-1/4}$ scaling of $v_3\{4\}/v_3\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ (where A is the atomic mass number) [31]. The non-Gaussian fluctuations scale with the number of participant nucleons, which roughly scales with A , leading to the observed scaling behavior. The lower right plot in Fig. 2 shows the XeXe/PbPb ratio, with the cyan line representing $(129/208)^{-1/4} \approx 1.13$, which agrees with the data within uncertainties.

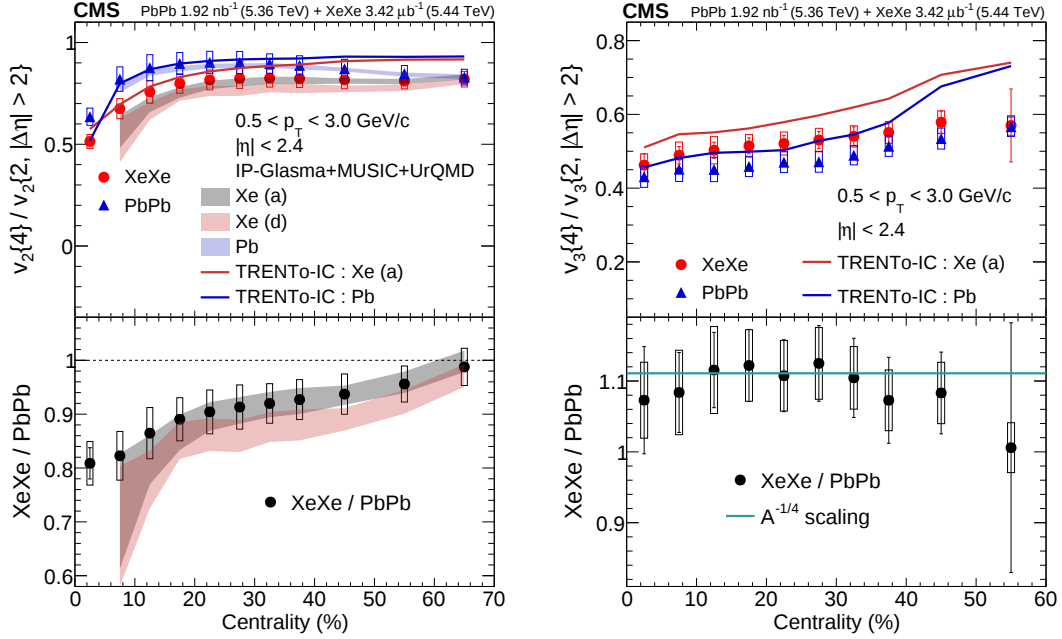


Figure 2: The upper plots show $v_n\{4\}/v_n\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ for elliptic ($n = 2$, left) and triangular ($n = 3$, right) flow, calculated from multiparticle cumulants, as a function of centrality in XeXe and PbPb collisions. The vertical bars (mostly smaller than the marker size) on the dots and the open boxes represent the statistical and systematic uncertainties in the data, respectively. The red and blue solid lines show the predictions from TRENTo-IC in terms of the initial-state eccentricities ε_n for deformed Xe (Xe (a)) and Pb nuclei. The shaded bands show the hydrodynamic predictions from the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +UrQMD model for Xe (a) and Xe (d). The lower plots display the ratio of the XeXe to the PbPb results. The cyan line in the lower right plot shows the theoretical prediction for $v_3\{4\}/v_3\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ based on $A^{-1/4}$ scaling.

The actual values of $v_2\{4\}$ and $v_3\{4\}$, without normalization by $v_n\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$, are given in Appendix A.2.

7.2.1 Normalized symmetric cumulants involving two or three flow harmonics

Figure 3 presents the normalized four-particle symmetric cumulants involving two harmonics, NSC(2, 3) (left) and NSC(2, 4) (right), as functions of centrality in XeXe and PbPb collisions. In order to suppress nonflow effects, these are calculated using two particles from each of two separated η regions: $-2.4 < \eta < -1$ and $1 < \eta < 2.4$. The NSC(2, 3) values probe the interplay between elliptic and triangular fluctuations influenced by eccentricities and deformation, while NSC(2, 4) is sensitive to nonlinear mode couplings and higher-multipole nuclear deformations (e.g., β_4), providing complementary constraints on the initial geometry. The results show that v_2^2 and v_3^2 are anticorrelated across all centralities, reflecting the anticorrelation between initial eccentricities ε_2 and ε_3 , whereas v_2^2 and v_4^2 are positively correlated due to nonlinear mode coupling, where v_4 receives contributions proportional to ε_2^2 [18]. The lower plots display the XeXe/PbPb ratios of NSC(2, 3) and NSC(2, 4), highlighting the differences between the initial states of the two systems. The IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +UrQMD hydrodynamic model captures the trends of both NSC(2, 3) and NSC(2, 4), albeit with a slight underestimation of the deviation from zero in some cases. Initial-state TRENTo-IC and IP-GLASMA-IC models reproduce

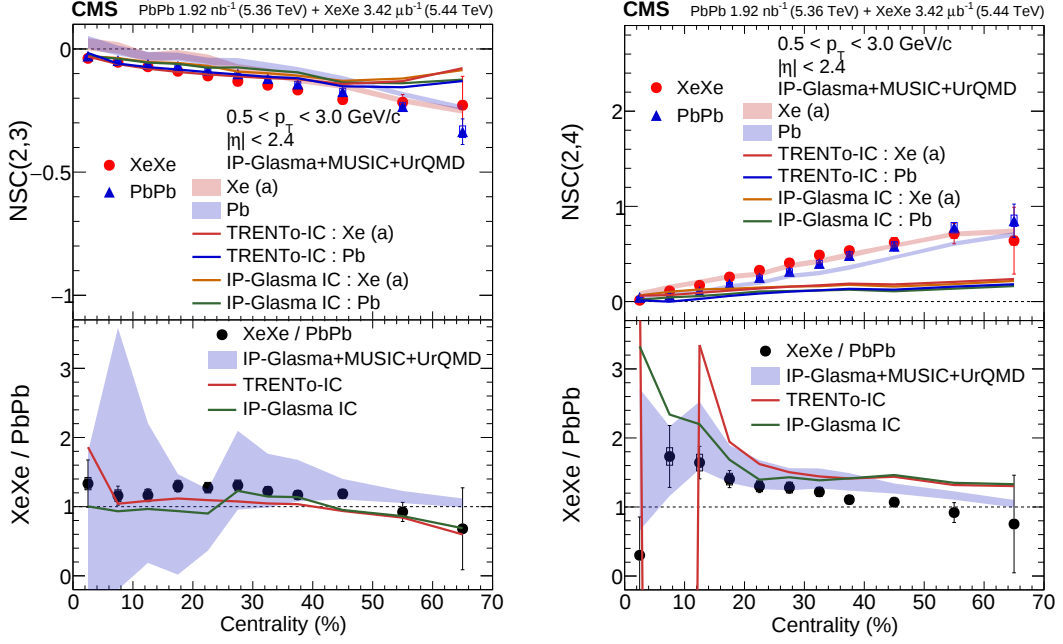


Figure 3: The upper plots show the normalized symmetric cumulants $NSC(2,3)$ (left) and $NSC(2,4)$ (right) as functions of centrality in XeXe and PbPb collisions, calculated from multi-particle cumulants. The vertical bars and the open boxes represent the statistical and systematic uncertainties, respectively. The red and blue solid lines show the predictions from TRENTO-IC in terms of initial-state eccentricities ε_n for deformed Xe (Xe (a)) and Pb nuclei. The orange and green solid lines show the predictions from the IP-GLASMA-IC model with the same Xe and Pb nucleus parameters, while the shaded bands show the hydrodynamic predictions from the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD model. The lower plots display the corresponding ratios of $NSC(m,n)$ for XeXe/PbPb. The red solid lines show the initial-state predictions from TRENTO-IC, while the green solid lines show those from IP-GLASMA-IC. The blue shaded band is the hydrodynamic prediction from IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD. In the 5–10% centrality range, the TRENTO-IC $NSC(2,4)$ ratio is negative because the PbPb prediction lies just below zero.

$NSC(2,3)$ except in peripheral collisions, where the linear relations $v_2 \propto \varepsilon_2$ and $v_3 \propto \varepsilon_3$ slightly break down [6]. For $NSC(2,4)$, initial-state models increasingly underestimate the data from central to peripheral collisions, underscoring that v_4 depends not only on ε_4 but also on non-linear contributions from ε_2^2 .

For the XeXe/PbPb ratios shown in the lower row of Fig. 3, IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD, IP-GLASMA-IC, and TRENTO-IC all give roughly comparable agreement with the $NSC(2,3)$ data, with different models being closer to the data in different regions of centrality. Surprisingly, the ratios are well described even in the centrality regions where the two IC models fail to reproduce the individual XeXe and PbPb results. For the $NSC(2,4)$ ratios, the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD model gives a reasonable description of the data, while the two IC models (especially the TRENTO-IC model) do notably worse. As was the case for the $NSC(2,3)$ ratios, the $NSC(2,4)$ ratios from the IC models are much closer to the data than the individual XeXe and PbPb values. These comparisons highlight the role of $NSC(2,3)$ and $NSC(2,4)$ in constraining the initial-state geometry and its fluctuations, helping discriminate between different models of the initial entropy deposition and different sets of nuclear deformation parameters.

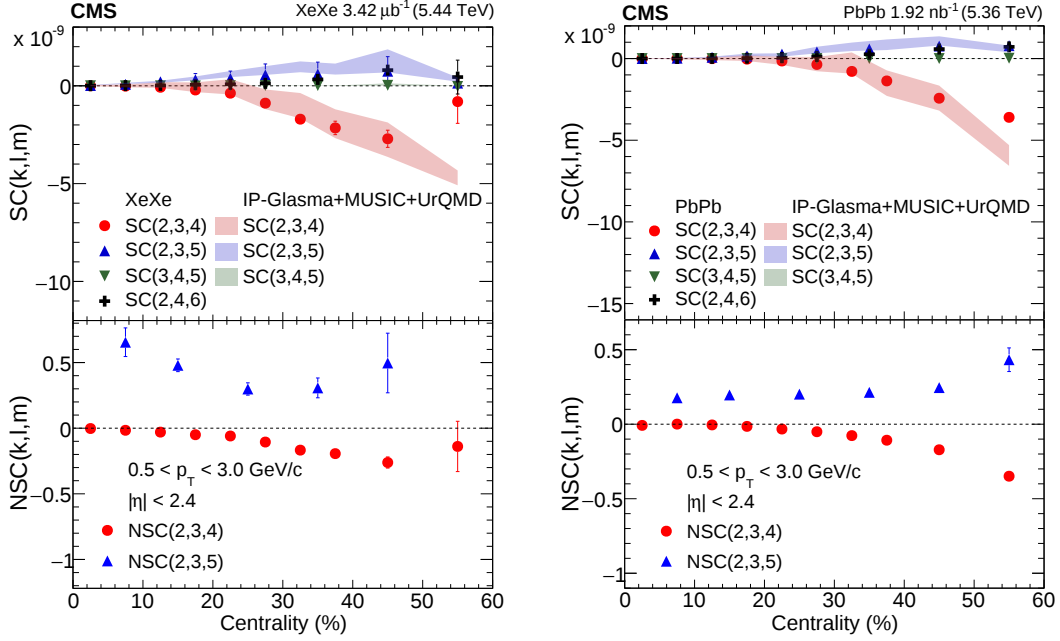


Figure 4: A selection of six-particle three-harmonic SC and NSC cumulants as functions of centrality in XeXe (left) and PbPb (right) collisions, calculated from multiparticle cumulants. The vertical bars represent the statistical uncertainties, with the systematic uncertainties being negligible. The shaded bands show hydrodynamic predictions from the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC+UrQMD model for the Xe (a) deformed nuclear shape parameters and for the spherical Pb nucleus.

Figure 4 presents six-particle symmetric cumulants $SC(k, l, m)$ and their normalized counterparts $NSC(k, l, m)$ versus centrality for XeXe collisions (left) measured for the first time, and PbPb collisions (right). The upper rows display $SC(2, 3, 4)$, $SC(2, 3, 5)$, $SC(3, 4, 5)$, and $SC(2, 4, 6)$, while the lower rows show $NSC(2, 3, 4)$ and $NSC(2, 3, 5)$ in both systems. These measurements reveal genuine correlations among three different flow harmonics. In particular, the nonzero $NSC(2, 3, 4)$ values indicate fluctuations in the intrinsic elliptical shape of the nuclear overlap region, beyond mere magnitude fluctuations of elliptic deformation [23]. The $NSC(2, 3, 4)$ values in XeXe and PbPb are similar in the most central collisions, while in the mid-central range (15–45%) the XeXe values are systematically larger in magnitude, suggesting moderately stronger shape fluctuations in the initial geometry. The $SC(3, 4, 5)$ values are consistent with zero in both systems, as seen in Refs. [23, 35], while the other $SC(k, l, m)$ cumulants have finite values. Hydrodynamic IP-GLASMA+MUSIC+UrQMD predictions describe the data well. Notably, $SC(2, 3, 5)$ and $NSC(2, 3, 5)$ show different trends in XeXe collisions, possibly indicating more nonlinear contribution for v_5 from v_2 and v_3 in the smaller system, with an even larger difference for the NSC data [35].

7.2.2 Correlations between higher-order moments of two flow harmonics

Figures 5 and 6 present the first comparisons of $nMHC(v_2^k, v_3^l)$ and $nMHC(v_2^k, v_4^l)$ from XeXe and PbPb collisions for $k, l = 2, 4, 6$. The specific combinations are indicated in each plot. A key observation is that $nMHC(v_2^k, v_4^l)$ is larger than $nMHC(v_2^k, v_3^l)$ for the same k and l in both systems (note the differences in vertical scale between the left and right plots in both

figures). This indicates a stronger correlation between higher order moments of v_2 and v_4 , consistent with the trend observed for NSC(2,4) versus NSC(2,3). This can be attributed to the fact that both v_2 and v_4 are strongly influenced by the initial-state geometry. A distinct pattern

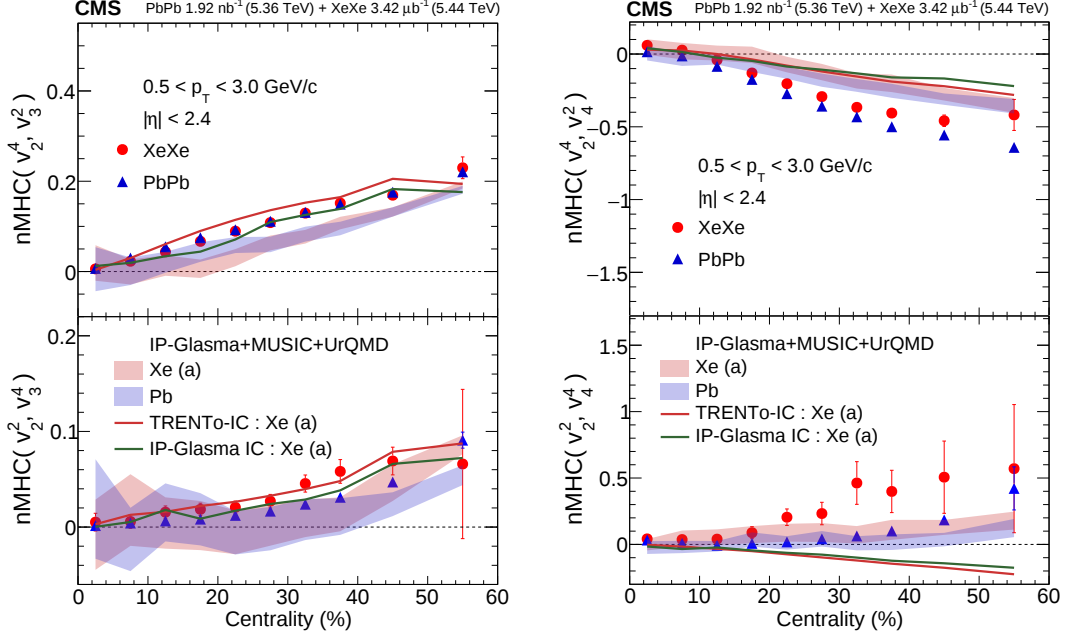


Figure 5: Six-particle normalized mixed harmonic cumulants (nMHC) as functions of centrality in XeXe and PbPb collisions, calculated from multiparticle cumulants. Upper panels: $\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_3^2)$ (left) and $\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_4^2)$ (right). Lower panels: $\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_3^4)$ (left) and $\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_4^4)$ (right). The vertical bars represent the statistical uncertainties and the systematic uncertainties are negligible. The shaded bands show hydrodynamic predictions from the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +UrQMD model for deformed Xe (Xe (a)) and Pb nuclei. The solid lines represent initial-state model predictions.

is observed in the magnitudes of correlations involving v_3 :

$$|\text{nMHC}(v_2^6, v_3^2)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_3^2)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_3^4)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_3^4)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_3^6)|. \quad (14)$$

similar to the findings in Ref. [18].

For v_4 , the sequence differs slightly, with the second and third terms swapped:

$$|\text{nMHC}(v_2^6, v_4^2)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_4^4)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_4^2)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_4^4)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_4^6)|. \quad (15)$$

Since v_2 and v_4 are strongly correlated, the inequality $|\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_4^4)| > |\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_4^2)|$ suggests that mode couplings involving equal orders of v_2 and v_4 exhibit stronger correlations.

System-size effects show a consistent trend across different $\text{nMHC}(v_2^k, v_3^l)$ and $\text{nMHC}(v_2^k, v_4^l)$ combinations. Given that initial-state fluctuations are expected to be stronger in the smaller XeXe system, correlations involving higher-order moments of v_3 and v_4 ($v_3^4, v_3^6, v_4^4, v_4^6$) correlated with lower-order moments of v_2 (v_2^2) show enhanced values in XeXe data, reflecting their greater sensitivity to fluctuations.

For correlations between v_2 and v_3 , the four-, six-, and eight-particle cumulants are found to

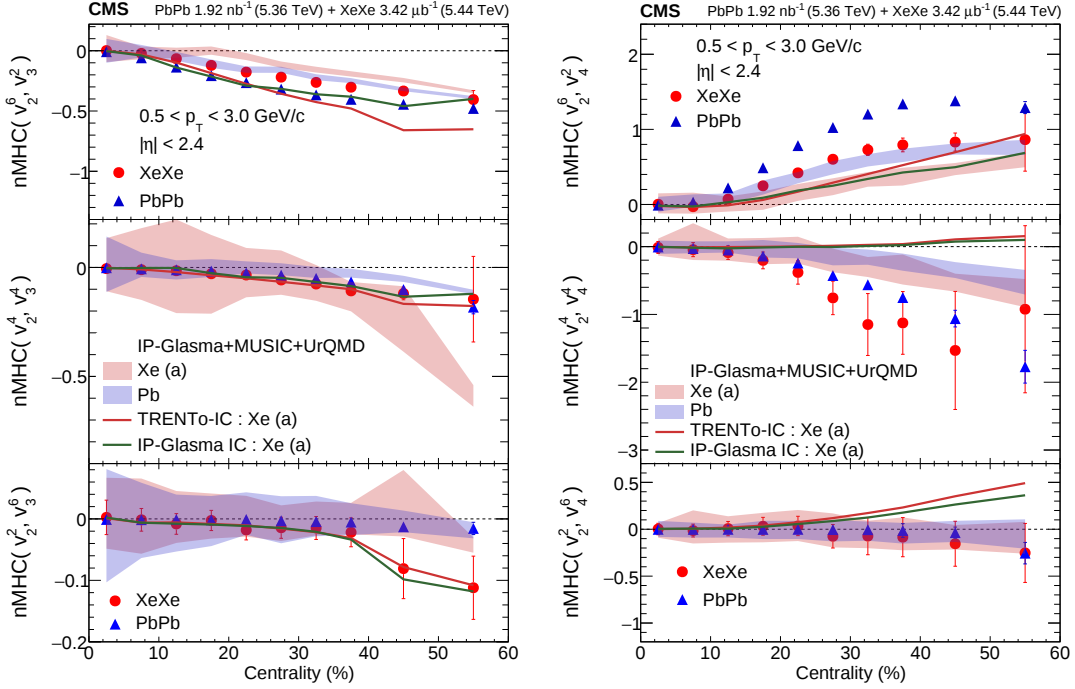


Figure 6: Eight-particle normalized mixed harmonic cumulants (nMHC) as functions of centrality in XeXe and PbPb collisions, calculated from multiparticle cumulants. Left panels: $\text{nMHC}(v_2^6, v_3^2)$ (upper), $\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_3^4)$ (middle), and $\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_3^6)$ (lower). Right panels: $\text{nMHC}(v_2^6, v_4^2)$ (upper), $\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_4^4)$ (middle), and $\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_4^6)$ (lower). The vertical bars represent statistical uncertainties and the systematic uncertainties are negligible. Shaded bands show hydrodynamic predictions from the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC+UrQMD model for deformed Xe (Xe (a)) and Pb nuclei, and the solid lines represent initial-state model predictions.

have negative, positive, and negative correlations, respectively, in both XeXe and PbPb collisions, in qualitative agreement with initial-state TRENTO-IC predictions [36]. For example, comparing the upper left panels of Figs. 3, 5, and 6: $\text{NSC}(2, 3)$ (4-particle), $\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_3^2)$ (6-particle), and $\text{nMHC}(v_2^6, v_3^2)$ (8-particle) follow this negative, positive, negative pattern.

However, this pattern does not hold for correlations between v_2 and v_4 : correlations involving higher-order moments of v_4 ($l = 4, 6$) swap signs for the same order n -particle cumulant. For instance, $\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_4^2)$ and $\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_4^4)$ have negative and positive correlations, respectively, despite both being 6-particle cumulants.

The right hand plots in Figs. 5 and 6 compare the hydrodynamic and initial-state model predictions for correlations of various orders of v_2 and v_4 , similar to previous studies using v_2 and v_3 [18]. While the hydrodynamic models qualitatively reproduce all of the observed trends, initial-state models exhibit striking disagreements in the correlations of $\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_4^4)$, $\text{nMHC}(v_2^4, v_4^4)$, and $\text{nMHC}(v_2^2, v_4^6)$, predicting correlations opposite in sign to what is observed. This discrepancy likely arises because these observables depend on fourth- and sixth-order moments of v_4 , which experience nonlinear hydrodynamic responses to ε_2 that grow towards peripheral collisions. This reinforces the conclusion that correlations between v_2 and v_4 predominantly develop dynamically during system evolution [18], rather than being fully determined by initial-state correlations.

Table 2 summarizes the signs of the correlations observed for different moments of v_2 and v_3/v_4

as functions of centrality.

Table 2: Signs of correlations between different moments of v_2 and v_3/v_4 as functions of centrality.

n -particle cumulant	Quantity	Correlation sign	Quantity	Correlation sign
4	NSC(2, 3)	−	NSC(2, 4)	+
6	nMHC(v_2^4, v_3^2)	+	nMHC(v_2^4, v_4^2)	−
6	nMHC(v_2^2, v_3^4)	+	nMHC(v_2^2, v_4^4)	+
8	nMHC(v_2^6, v_3^2)	−	nMHC(v_2^6, v_4^2)	+
8	nMHC(v_2^4, v_3^4)	−	nMHC(v_2^4, v_4^4)	−
8	nMHC(v_2^2, v_3^6)	−	nMHC(v_2^2, v_4^6)	− (within uncertainties)

8 Summary

For the first time, individual flow harmonics, two- and three-harmonic correlations, and higher-order mixed harmonic cumulants are measured and compared in detail for xenon-xenon (XeXe) and lead-lead (PbPb) collisions at $\sqrt{s_{\text{NN}}} = 5.44$ and 5.36 TeV, respectively. Theoretical predictions of the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD hydrodynamic model, and the TRENTO-IC and IP-GLASMA-IC initial-state models, calculated with various sets of deformation parameters for the ^{129}Xe nucleus, are compared to the data. The final-state model calculation from IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD with dynamic nuclear deformation parameters $a_0 = 0.492$ and $\beta_2 = 0.207$ for ^{129}Xe provides the best agreement among tested parameter sets. Here, a_0 is the nuclear skin depth, and β_2 is the quadrupole deformation parameter. This comparison indicates that including a prolate deformation in the parameterization of the ^{129}Xe nuclear shape (in contrast to the doubly magic, nearly spherical ^{208}Pb nucleus) is necessary to reproduce the measured flow observables within the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +URQMD framework.

On the other hand, the difference in initial-state predictions from the TRENTO-IC and IP-GLASMA-IC models not only point to the sensitivity of these observables to the pre-equilibrium dynamics needed to model the experimental data, but also to the increasing nonlinearity of the higher-order moments of the flow harmonics in peripheral collisions. While differences between the two initial-state models are visible, a definitive conclusion about their relative performance cannot be drawn, as such a comparison without the inclusion of hydrodynamic evolution and freeze-out stages remains incomplete.

The comparison of higher-order moments in XeXe and PbPb collisions provides insight into the impact of system size and shape on these observables. Measurements involving higher-order moments of fluctuation-driven flow harmonics, such as v_3 and v_4 , are, as expected, larger in the smaller XeXe system.

Subtle differences exist between data and model calculations with the current sets of parameters. These differences highlight the importance of fine-tuning the model parameters, including not only the nuclear deformation parameters but also those related to hydrodynamic calculations, such as transport coefficients and freeze-out criteria. Such analyses can significantly improve the overall understanding of initial conditions in heavy ion collisions and transport properties of the quark-gluon plasma created at the LHC. Furthermore, this work provides a data-driven, multi-faceted probe of flow fluctuations, offering direct sensitivity to correlations arising from nonlinear hydrodynamic response.

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A v_2, v_3, v_4 vs. centrality

A.1 $v_4\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ vs. centrality

Figure A.1 shows the same information as the upper and middle rows of Fig. 1, but now for v_4 .

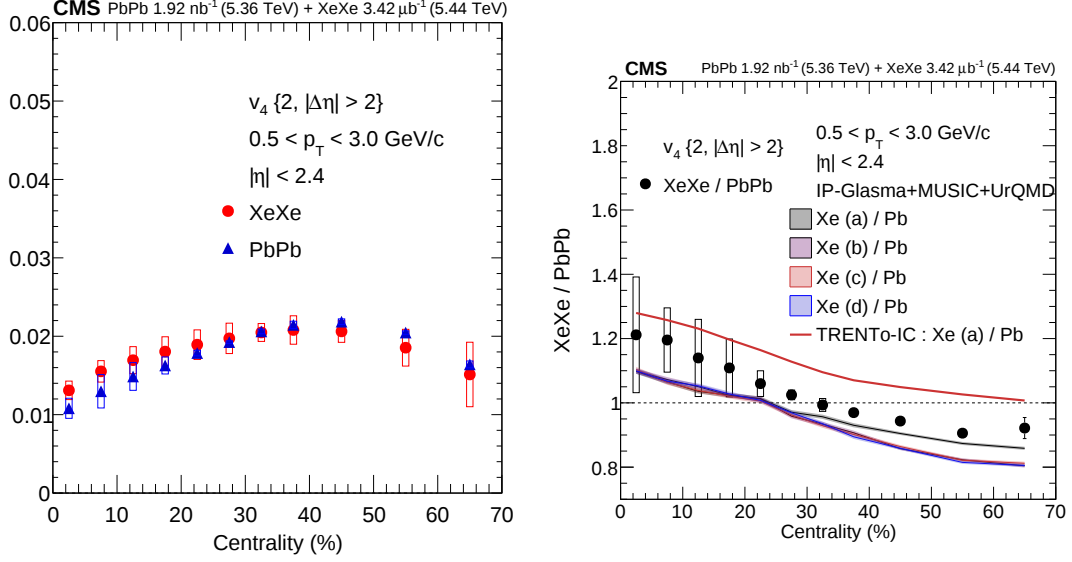


Figure A.1: Measured $v_4\{2, |\Delta\eta| > 2\}$ cumulant values (left) as a function of centrality in XeXe and PbPb collisions, calculated using the 2-particle correlation method. The ratio of the cumulant values (right) in XeXe vs PbPb collisions is shown as a function of centrality. The vertical bars and open bands represent the statistical and systematic uncertainties in the data, respectively. The red line in the right plot shows the prediction from TRENTO-IC in terms of ε_4 for Xe (a), while the shaded bands display the different hydrodynamic predictions for four sets of Xe deformations from the IP-GLASMA+MUSIC +UrQMD model.

A.2 $v_2\{4\}$ and $v_3\{4\}$ vs. centrality

Figure A.2 shows similar measurements to those given in the upper plots of Fig. 1, but now for $v_2\{4\}$ and $v_3\{4\}$.

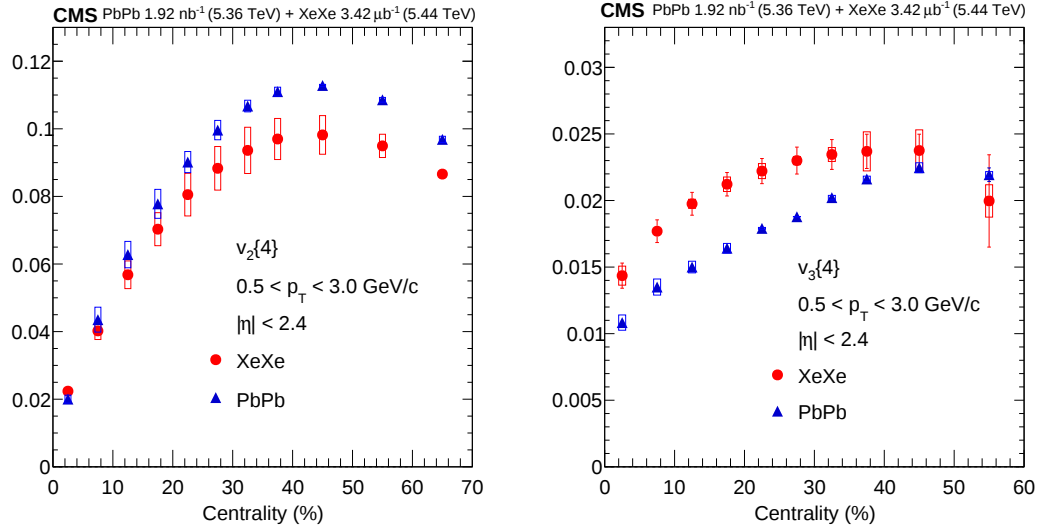


Figure A.2: Measured $v_2\{4\}$ (left) and $v_3\{4\}$ (right) cumulant values as a function of centrality for XeXe and PbPb collisions, calculated using 4-particle cumulants. The vertical bars and open boxes represent the statistical and systematic uncertainties, respectively.

B The CMS Collaboration

Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan, Armenia

A. Hayrapetyan, V. Makarenko , A. Tumasyan¹ 

Institut für Hochenergiephysik, Vienna, Austria

W. Adam , J.W. Andrejkovic, L. Benato , T. Bergauer , M. Dragicevic , C. Giordano, P.S. Hussain , M. Jeitler² , N. Krammer , A. Li , D. Liko , I. Mikulec , J. Schieck² , R. Schöffbeck² , D. Schwarz , M. Shooshtari , M. Sonawane , W. Waltenberger , C.-E. Wulz² 

Universiteit Antwerpen, Antwerpen, Belgium

T. Janssen , H. Kwon , D. Ocampo Henao , T. Van Laer , P. Van Mechelen 

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium

J. Bierkens , N. Breugelmans, J. D'Hondt , S. Dansana , A. De Moor , M. Delcourt , F. Heyen, Y. Hong , P. Kashko , S. Lowette , I. Makarenko , D. Müller , J. Song , S. Tavernier , M. Tytgat³ , G.P. Van Onsem , S. Van Putte , D. Vannerom 

Université Libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium

B. Bilin , B. Clerbaux , A.K. Das, I. De Bruyn , G. De Lentdecker , H. Evard , L. Favart , P. Gianneios , A. Khalilzadeh, F.A. Khan , A. Malara , M.A. Shahzad, L. Thomas , M. Vanden Bemden , C. Vander Velde , P. Vanlaer , F. Zhang 

Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

M. De Coen , D. Dobur , G. Gokbulut , J. Knolle , L. Lambrecht , D. Marckx , K. Skovpen , N. Van Den Bossche , J. van der Linden , J. Vandenbroeck , L. Wezenbeek 

Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

S. Bein , A. Benecke , A. Bethani , G. Bruno , A. Cappati , J. De Favereau De Jeneret , C. Delaere , A. Giammanco , A.O. Guzel , V. Lemaitre, J. Lidrych , P. Malek , P. Mastrapasqua , S. Turkcapar 

Centro Brasileiro de Pesquisas Fisicas, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

G.A. Alves , M. Barroso Ferreira Filho , E. Coelho , C. Hensel , T. Menezes De Oliveira , C. Mora Herrera⁴ , P. Rebello Teles , M. Soeiro , E.J. Tonelli Manganote⁵ , A. Vilela Pereira⁴ 

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

W.L. Aldá Júnior , H. Brandao Malbouisson , W. Carvalho , J. Chinellato⁶ , M. Costa Reis , E.M. Da Costa , G.G. Da Silveira⁷ , D. De Jesus Damiao , S. Fonseca De Souza , R. Gomes De Souza , S. S. Jesus , T. Laux Kuhn⁷ , M. Macedo , K. Mota Amarilo , L. Mundim , H. Nogima , J.P. Pinheiro , A. Santoro , A. Sznajder , M. Thiel , F. Torres Da Silva De Araujo⁸ 

Universidade Estadual Paulista, Universidade Federal do ABC, São Paulo, Brazil

C.A. Bernardes⁷ , T.R. Fernandez Perez Tomei , E.M. Gregores , B. Lopes Da Costa , I. Maietto Silverio , P.G. Mercadante , S.F. Novaes , B. Orzari , Sandra S. Padula , V. Scheurer

Institute for Nuclear Research and Nuclear Energy, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria

A. Aleksandrov , G. Antchev , P. Danev, R. Hadjiiska , P. Iaydjiev , M. Misheva , M. Shopova , G. Sultanov 

University of Sofia, Sofia, Bulgaria

A. Dimitrov , L. Litov , B. Pavlov , P. Petkov , A. Petrov 

Instituto De Alta Investigación, Universidad de Tarapacá, Casilla 7 D, Arica, Chile

S. Keshri , D. Laroze , S. Thakur 

Universidad Tecnica Federico Santa Maria, Valparaiso, Chile

W. Brooks 

Beihang University, Beijing, China

T. Cheng , T. Javaid , L. Wang , L. Yuan 

Department of Physics, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

Z. Hu , Z. Liang, J. Liu, X. Wang 

Institute of High Energy Physics, Beijing, China

G.M. Chen⁹ , H.S. Chen⁹ , M. Chen⁹ , Y. Chen , Q. Hou , X. Hou, F. Iemmi , C.H. Jiang, A. Kapoor¹⁰ , H. Liao , G. Liu , Z.-A. Liu¹¹ , J.N. Song¹¹, S. Song, J. Tao , C. Wang⁹, J. Wang , H. Zhang , J. Zhao 

State Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Technology, Peking University, Beijing, China

A. Agapitos , Y. Ban , A. Carvalho Antunes De Oliveira , S. Deng , B. Guo, Q. Guo, C. Jiang , A. Levin , C. Li , Q. Li , Y. Mao, S. Qian, S.J. Qian , X. Qin, X. Sun , D. Wang , J. Wang, H. Yang, M. Zhang, Y. Zhao, C. Zhou 

State Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Technology, Institute of Quantum Matter, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

S. Yang 

Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China

Z. You 

University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China

K. Jaffel , N. Lu 

Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

G. Bauer¹², B. Li¹³, H. Wang , K. Yi¹⁴ , J. Zhang 

Institute of Modern Physics and Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Ion-beam Application (MOE) - Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Y. Li

Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

Z. Lin , C. Lu , M. Xiao¹⁵ 

Universidad de Los Andes, Bogota, Colombia

C. Avila , D.A. Barbosa Trujillo , A. Cabrera , C. Florez , J. Fraga , J.A. Reyes Vega

Universidad de Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia

C. Rendón , M. Rodriguez , A.A. Ruales Barbosa , J.D. Ruiz Alvarez 

University of Split, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture, Split, Croatia

N. Godinovic , D. Lelas , A. Sculac 

University of Split, Faculty of Science, Split, Croatia

M. Kovac , A. Petkovic , T. Sculac 

Institute Rudjer Boskovic, Zagreb, Croatia

P. Bargassa , V. Brigljevic , B.K. Chitroda , D. Ferencek , K. Jakovcic, A. Starodumov , T. Susa 

University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus

A. Attikis , K. Christoforou , A. Hadjiagapiou, C. Leonidou , C. Nicolaou, L. Paizanos , F. Ptochos , P.A. Razis , H. Rykaczewski, H. Saka , A. Stepennov 

Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

M. Finger[†] , M. Finger Jr. 

Escuela Politecnica Nacional, Quito, Ecuador

E. Ayala 

Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Quito, Ecuador

E. Carrera Jarrin 

Academy of Scientific Research and Technology of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Egyptian Network of High Energy Physics, Cairo, Egypt

H. Abdalla¹⁶ , Y. Assran^{17,18}

Center for High Energy Physics (CHEP-FU), Fayoum University, El-Fayoum, Egypt

M. Abdullah Al-Mashad , A. Hussein, H. Mohammed 

National Institute of Chemical Physics and Biophysics, Tallinn, Estonia

K. Ehataht , M. Kadastik, T. Lange , C. Nielsen , J. Pata , M. Raidal , N. Seeba , L. Tani 

Department of Physics, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

A. Milieva , K. Osterberg , M. Voutilainen 

Helsinki Institute of Physics, Helsinki, Finland

N. Bin Norjoharuddeen , E. Brücken , F. Garcia , P. Inkaew , K.T.S. Kallonen , R. Kumar Verma , T. Lampén , K. Lassila-Perini , B. Lehtela , S. Lehti , T. Lindén , N.R. Mancilla Xinto , M. Myllymäki , M.m. Rantanen , S. Saariokari , N.T. Toikka , J. Tuominiemi 

Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology, Lappeenranta, Finland

H. Kirschenmann , P. Luukka , H. Petrow 

IRFU, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette, France

M. Besancon , F. Couderc , M. Dejardin , D. Denegri, P. Devouge, J.L. Faure , F. Ferri , S. Ganjour , P. Gras , G. Hamel de Monchenault , M. Kumar , V. Lohezic , J. Malcles , F. Orlandi , L. Portales , S. Ronchi , M.Ö. Sahin , A. Savoy-Navarro¹⁹ , P. Simkina , M. Titov , M. Tornago 

Laboratoire Leprince-Ringuet, CNRS/IN2P3, Ecole Polytechnique, Institut Polytechnique de Paris, Palaiseau, France

F. Beaudette , G. Boldrini , P. Busson , C. Charlot , M. Chiusi , T.D. Cuisset , F. Damas , O. Davignon , A. De Wit , T. Debnath , I.T. Ehle , B.A. Fontana Santos Alves , S. Ghosh , A. Gilbert , R. Granier de Cassagnac , L. Kalipoliti , M. Manoni , M. Nguyen , S. Obraztsov , C. Ochando , R. Salerno , J.B. Sauvan , Y. Sirois , G. Sokmen, L. Urda Gómez , A. Zabi , A. Zghiche 

Université de Strasbourg, CNRS, IPHC UMR 7178, Strasbourg, France

J.-L. Agram²⁰ , J. Andrea , D. Bloch , J.-M. Brom , E.C. Chabert , C. Collard 

G. Coulon, S. Falke^{ID}, U. Goerlach^{ID}, R. Haeberle^{ID}, A.-C. Le Bihan^{ID}, M. Meena^{ID}, O. Poncet^{ID}, G. Saha^{ID}, P. Vaucelle^{ID}

Centre de Calcul de l'Institut National de Physique Nucleaire et de Physique des Particules, CNRS/IN2P3, Villeurbanne, France

A. Di Florio^{ID}

Institut de Physique des 2 Infinis de Lyon (IP2I), Villeurbanne, France

D. Amram, S. Beauceron^{ID}, B. Blancon^{ID}, G. Boudoul^{ID}, N. Chanon^{ID}, D. Contardo^{ID}, P. Depasse^{ID}, C. Dozen²¹^{ID}, H. El Mamouni, J. Fay^{ID}, S. Gascon^{ID}, M. Gouzevitch^{ID}, C. Greenberg^{ID}, G. Grenier^{ID}, B. Ille^{ID}, E. Jourdhuy, I.B. Laktineh, M. Lethuillier^{ID}, B. Massoteau^{ID}, L. Mirabito, A. Purohit^{ID}, M. Vander Donckt^{ID}, J. Xiao^{ID}

Georgian Technical University, Tbilisi, Georgia

I. Lomidze^{ID}, T. Toriashvili²²^{ID}, Z. Tsamalaidze²³^{ID}

RWTH Aachen University, I. Physikalisches Institut, Aachen, Germany

V. Botta^{ID}, S. Consuegra Rodríguez^{ID}, L. Feld^{ID}, K. Klein^{ID}, M. Lipinski^{ID}, D. Meuser^{ID}, P. Natland^{ID}, V. Oppenländer, A. Pauls^{ID}, D. Pérez Adán^{ID}, N. Röwert^{ID}, M. Teroerde^{ID}

RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut A, Aachen, Germany

C. Daumann, S. Diekmann^{ID}, A. Dodonova^{ID}, N. Eich^{ID}, D. Eliseev^{ID}, F. Engelke^{ID}, J. Erdmann^{ID}, M. Erdmann^{ID}, B. Fischer^{ID}, T. Hebbeker^{ID}, K. Hoepfner^{ID}, F. Ivone^{ID}, A. Jung^{ID}, N. Kumar^{ID}, M.y. Lee^{ID}, F. Mausolf^{ID}, M. Merschmeyer^{ID}, A. Meyer^{ID}, F. Nowotny, A. Pozdnyakov^{ID}, W. Redjeb^{ID}, H. Reithler^{ID}, U. Sarkar^{ID}, V. Sarkisovi^{ID}, A. Schmidt^{ID}, C. Seth, A. Sharma^{ID}, J.L. Spah^{ID}, V. Vaulin, S. Zaleski

RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut B, Aachen, Germany

M.R. Beckers^{ID}, C. Dziwok^{ID}, G. Flügge^{ID}, N. Hoeflich^{ID}, T. Kress^{ID}, A. Nowack^{ID}, O. Pooth^{ID}, A. Stahl^{ID}, A. Zotz^{ID}

Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron, Hamburg, Germany

H. Aarup Petersen^{ID}, A. Abel, M. Aldaya Martin^{ID}, J. Alimena^{ID}, S. Amoroso, Y. An^{ID}, I. Andreev^{ID}, J. Bach^{ID}, S. Baxter^{ID}, M. Bayatmakou^{ID}, H. Becerril Gonzalez^{ID}, O. Behnke^{ID}, A. Belvedere^{ID}, F. Blekman²⁴^{ID}, K. Borras²⁵^{ID}, A. Campbell^{ID}, S. Chatterjee^{ID}, L.X. Coll Saravia^{ID}, G. Eckerlin, D. Eckstein^{ID}, E. Gallo²⁴^{ID}, A. Geiser^{ID}, V. Guglielmi^{ID}, M. Guthoff^{ID}, A. Hinzmann^{ID}, L. Jeppe^{ID}, M. Kasemann^{ID}, C. Kleinwort^{ID}, R. Kogler^{ID}, M. Komm^{ID}, D. Krücker^{ID}, W. Lange, D. Leyva Pernia^{ID}, K.-Y. Lin^{ID}, K. Lipka²⁶^{ID}, W. Lohmann²⁷^{ID}, J. Malvaso^{ID}, R. Mankel^{ID}, I.-A. Melzer-Pellmann^{ID}, M. Mendizabal Morentin^{ID}, A.B. Meyer^{ID}, G. Milella^{ID}, K. Moral Figueroa^{ID}, A. Mussgiller^{ID}, L.P. Nair^{ID}, J. Niedziela^{ID}, A. Nürnberg^{ID}, J. Park^{ID}, E. Ranken^{ID}, A. Raspereza^{ID}, D. Rastorguev^{ID}, L. Rygaard^{ID}, M. Scham^{28,25}^{ID}, S. Schnake²⁵^{ID}, P. Schütze^{ID}, C. Schwanenberger²⁴^{ID}, D. Selivanova^{ID}, K. Sharko^{ID}, M. Shchedrolosiev^{ID}, D. Stafford^{ID}, M. Torkian, F. Vazzoler^{ID}, A. Ventura Barroso^{ID}, R. Walsh^{ID}, D. Wang^{ID}, Q. Wang^{ID}, K. Wichmann, L. Wiens²⁵^{ID}, C. Wissing^{ID}, Y. Yang^{ID}, S. Zakharov, A. Zimmermann Castro Santos^{ID}

University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

A. Albrecht^{ID}, A.R. Alves Andrade^{ID}, M. Antonello^{ID}, S. Bollweg, M. Bonanomi^{ID}, K. El Morabit^{ID}, Y. Fischer^{ID}, M. Frahm, E. Garutti^{ID}, A. Grohsjean^{ID}, A.A. Guvenli^{ID}, J. Haller^{ID}, D. Hundhausen, H.R. Jabusch^{ID}, G. Kasieczka^{ID}, P. Keicher^{ID}, R. Klanner^{ID}, W. Korcarı^{ID}, T. Kramer^{ID}, C.c. Kuo, V. Kutzner^{ID}, F. Labe^{ID}, J. Lange^{ID}, A. Lobanov^{ID}, L. Moureaux^{ID}, M. Mrowietz, A. Nigamova^{ID}, K. Nikolopoulos^{ID}, Y. Nissan, A. Paasch^{ID},

K.J. Pena Rodriguez , N. Prouvost, T. Quadfasel , B. Raciti , M. Rieger , D. Savoie , J. Schindler , P. Schleper , M. Schröder , J. Schwandt , M. Sommerhalder , H. Stadie , G. Steinbrück , A. Tews, R. Ward , B. Wiederspan, M. Wolf 

Karlsruher Institut fuer Technologie, Karlsruhe, Germany

S. Brommer , E. Butz , Y.M. Chen , T. Chwalek , A. Dierlamm , G.G. Dincer , U. Elicabuk, N. Faltermann , M. Giffels , A. Gottmann , F. Hartmann²⁹ , R. Hofsaess , M. Horzela , U. Husemann , J. Kieseler , M. Klute , R. Kunnilan Muhammed Rafeek, O. Lavoryk , J.M. Lawhorn , A. Lintuluoto , S. Maier , M. Mormile , Th. Müller , E. Pfeffer , M. Presilla , G. Quast , K. Rabbertz , B. Regnery , R. Schmieder, N. Shadskiy , I. Shvetsov , H.J. Simonis , L. Sowa , L. Stockmeier, K. Tauqeer, M. Toms , B. Topko , N. Trevisani , C. Verstege , T. Voigtländer , R.F. Von Cube , J. Von Den Driesch, M. Wassmer , R. Wolf , W.D. Zeuner , X. Zuo 

Institute of Nuclear and Particle Physics (INPP), NCSR Demokritos, Aghia Paraskevi, Greece

G. Anagnostou , G. Daskalakis , A. Kyriakis , A. Papadopoulos²⁹ , A. Stakia 

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

G. Melachroinos, Z. Painesis , I. Paraskevas , N. Saoulidou , K. Theofilatos , E. Tziaferi , K. Vellidis , I. Zisopoulos 

National Technical University of Athens, Athens, Greece

T. Chatzistavrou , G. Karapostoli , K. Kousouris , E. Siamarkou, G. Tsipolitis 

University of Ioánnina, Ioánnina, Greece

I. Bestintzanos, I. Evangelou , C. Foudas, P. Katsoulis, P. Kokkas , P.G. Kosmoglou Kioseoglou , N. Manthos , I. Papadopoulos , J. Strologas 

HUN-REN Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest, Hungary

D. Druzhkin , C. Hajdu , D. Horvath^{30,31} , K. Márton, A.J. Rádl³² , F. Sikler , V. Veszpremi 

MTA-ELTE Lendület CMS Particle and Nuclear Physics Group, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

M. Csanád , K. Farkas , A. Fehérkuti³³ , M.M.A. Gadallah³⁴ , Á. Kadlecik , M. León Coello , G. Pásztor , G.I. Veres 

Faculty of Informatics, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary

B. Ujvari , G. Zilizi 

HUN-REN ATOMKI - Institute of Nuclear Research, Debrecen, Hungary

G. Bencze, S. Czellar, J. Molnar, Z. Szillasi

Karoly Robert Campus, MATE Institute of Technology, Gyongyos, Hungary

T. Csorgo³³ , F. Nemes³³ , T. Novak , I. Szanyi³⁵ 

Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

S. Bansal , S.B. Beri, V. Bhatnagar , G. Chaudhary , S. Chauhan , N. Dhingra³⁶ , A. Kaur , A. Kaur , H. Kaur , M. Kaur , S. Kumar , T. Sheokand, J.B. Singh , A. Singla 

University of Delhi, Delhi, India

A. Bhardwaj , A. Chhetri , B.C. Choudhary , A. Kumar , A. Kumar , M. Naimuddin , S. Phor , K. Ranjan , M.K. Saini

University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, IndiaS. Acharya³⁷ , B. Gomber³⁷ , B. Sahu³⁷ **Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Kanpur, India**S. Mukherjee **Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, HBNI, Kolkata, India**S. Baradia , S. Bhattacharya , S. Das Gupta, S. Dutta , S. Dutta, S. Sarkar**Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Madras, India**M.M. Ameen , P.K. Behera , S. Chatterjee , G. Dash , A. Dattamunsi, P. Jana , P. Kalbhor , S. Kamble , J.R. Komaragiri³⁸ , T. Mishra , P.R. Pujahari , N.R. Saha , A.K. Sikdar , R.K. Singh , P. Verma , S. Verma , A. Vijay **IISER Mohali, India, Mohali, India**

B.K. Sirasva

Tata Institute of Fundamental Research-A, Mumbai, IndiaL. Bhatt, S. Dugad , G.B. Mohanty , M. Shelake , P. Suryadevara**Tata Institute of Fundamental Research-B, Mumbai, India**A. Bala , S. Banerjee , S. Barman³⁹ , R.M. Chatterjee, M. Guchait , Sh. Jain , A. Jaiswal, B.M. Joshi , S. Kumar , M. Maity³⁹, G. Majumder , K. Mazumdar , S. Parolia , R. Saxena , A. Thachayath **National Institute of Science Education and Research, An OCC of Homi Bhabha National Institute, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India**S. Bahinipati⁴⁰ , D. Maity⁴¹ , P. Mal , K. Naskar⁴¹ , A. Nayak⁴¹ , S. Nayak, K. Pal , R. Raturi, P. Sadangi, S.K. Swain , S. Varghese⁴¹ , D. Vats⁴¹ **Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune, India**A. Alpana , S. Dube , P. Hazarika , B. Kansal , A. Laha , R. Sharma , S. Sharma , K.Y. Vaish **Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, Telangana, India**S. Ghosh **Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran**H. Bakhshiansohi⁴² , A. Jafari⁴³ , V. Sedighzadeh Dalavi , M. Zeinali⁴⁴ **Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM), Tehran, Iran**S. Bashiri , S. Chenarani⁴⁵ , S.M. Etesami , Y. Hosseini , M. Khakzad , E. Khazaie , M. Mohammadi Najafabadi , S. Tizchang⁴⁶ **University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland**M. Felcini , M. Grunewald **INFN Sezione di Bari^a, Università di Bari^b, Politecnico di Bari^c, Bari, Italy**M. Abbrescia^{a,b} , M. Barbieri^{a,b}, M. Buonsante^{a,b} , A. Colaleo^{a,b} , D. Creanza^{a,c} , B. D'Anzi^{a,b} , N. De Filippis^{a,c} , M. De Palma^{a,b} , W. Elmetenawee^{a,b,47} , N. Ferrara^{a,c} , L. Fiore^a , L. Longo^a , M. Louka^{a,b} , G. Maggi^{a,c} , M. Maggi^a , I. Margjeka^a , V. Mastrapasqua^{a,b} , S. My^{a,b} , F. Nenna^{a,b} , S. Nuzzo^{a,b} , A. Pellecchia^{a,b} , A. Pompili^{a,b} , G. Pugliese^{a,c} , R. Radogna^{a,b} , D. Ramos^a , A. Ranieri^a , L. Silvestris^a , F.M. Simone^{a,c} , Ü. Sözbilir^a , A. Stamerra^{a,b} , D. Troiano^{a,b} , R. Venditti^{a,b} , P. Verwilligen^a , A. Zaza^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Bologna^a, Università di Bologna^b, Bologna, Italy

G. Abbiendi^a , C. Battilana^{a,b} , D. Bonacorsi^{a,b} , P. Capiluppi^{a,b} , M. Cuffiani^{a,b} , G.M. Dallavalle^a , T. Diotallevi^{a,b} , F. Fabbri^a , A. Fanfani^{a,b} , D. Fasanella^a , P. Giacomelli^a , C. Grandi^a , L. Guiducci^{a,b} , S. Lo Meo^{a,48} , M. Lorusso^{a,b} , L. Lunerti^a , S. Marcellini^a , G. Masetti^a , F.L. Navarria^{a,b} , G. Paggi^{a,b} , A. Perrotta^a , F. Primavera^{a,b} , A.M. Rossi^{a,b} , S. Rossi Tisbeni^{a,b} , T. Rovelli^{a,b} , G.P. Siroli^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Catania^a, Università di Catania^b, Catania, Italy

S. Costa^{a,b,49} , A. Di Mattia^a , A. Lapertosa^a , R. Potenza^{a,b} , A. Tricomi^{a,b,49} 

INFN Sezione di Firenze^a, Università di Firenze^b, Firenze, Italy

J. Altork^{a,b} , P. Assiouras^a , G. Barbagli^a , G. Bardelli^a , M. Bartolini^{a,b} , A. Calandri^{a,b} , B. Camaiani^{a,b} , A. Cassese^a , R. Ceccarelli^a , V. Ciulli^{a,b} , C. Civinini^a , R. D'Alessandro^{a,b} , L. Damenti^{a,b} , E. Focardi^{a,b} , T. Kello^a , G. Latino^{a,b} , P. Lenzi^{a,b} , M. Lizzo^a , M. Meschini^a , S. Paoletti^a , A. Papanastassiou^{a,b} , G. Sguazzoni^a , L. Viliani^a 

INFN Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati, Italy

L. Benussi , S. Colafranceschi , S. Meola⁵⁰ , D. Piccolo 

INFN Sezione di Genova^a, Università di Genova^b, Genova, Italy

M. Alves Gallo Pereira^a , F. Ferro^a , E. Robutti^a , S. Tosi^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Milano-Bicocca^a, Università di Milano-Bicocca^b, Milano, Italy

A. Benaglia^a , F. Brivio^a , V. Camagni^{a,b} , F. Cetorelli^{a,b} , F. De Guio^{a,b} , M.E. Dinardo^{a,b} , P. Dini^a , S. Gennai^a , R. Gerosa^{a,b} , A. Ghezzi^{a,b} , P. Govoni^{a,b} , L. Guzzi^a , M.R. Kim^a , G. Lavizzari^{a,b} , M.T. Lucchini^{a,b} , M. Malberti^a , S. Malvezzi^a , A. Massironi^a , D. Menasce^a , L. Moroni^a , M. Paganoni^{a,b} , S. Palluotto^{a,b} , D. Pedrini^a , A. Perego^{a,b} , B.S. Pinolini^a , G. Pizzati^{a,b} , S. Ragazzi^{a,b} , T. Tabarelli de Fatis^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Napoli^a, Università di Napoli 'Federico II'^b, Napoli, Italy; Università della Basilicata^c, Potenza, Italy; Scuola Superiore Meridionale (SSM)^d, Napoli, Italy

S. Buontempo^a , A. Cagnotta^{a,b} , C. Di Fraia^{a,b} , F. Fabozzi^{a,c} , L. Favilla^{a,d} , A.O.M. Iorio^{a,b} , L. Lista^{a,b,51} , P. Paolucci^{a,29} , B. Rossi^a 

INFN Sezione di Padova^a, Università di Padova^b, Padova, Italy; Università degli Studi di Cagliari^c, Cagliari, Italy

P. Azzi^a , N. Bacchetta^{a,52} , D. Bisello^{a,b} , P. Bortignon^a , G. Bortolato^{a,b} , A.C.M. Bulla^a , R. Carlin^{a,b} , T. Dorigo^{a,53} , F. Gasparini^{a,b} , S. Giorgetti^a , A. Gozzelino^a , E. Lusiani^a , M. Margoni^{a,b} , A.T. Meneguzzo^{a,b} , J. Pazzini^{a,b} , P. Ronchese^{a,b} , R. Rossin^{a,b} , F. Simonetto^{a,b} , M. Tosi^{a,b} , A. Triossi^{a,b} , S. Ventura^a , M. Zanetti^{a,b} , P. Zotto^{a,b} , A. Zucchetta^{a,b} , G. Zumerle^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Pavia^a, Università di Pavia^b, Pavia, Italy

A. Braghieri^a , S. Calzaferri^a , P. Montagna^{a,b} , M. Pelliccioni^a , V. Re^a , C. Riccardi^{a,b} , P. Salvini^a , I. Vai^{a,b} , P. Vitulo^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Perugia^a, Università di Perugia^b, Perugia, Italy

S. Ajmal^{a,b} , M.E. Ascoti^{a,b} , G.M. Bilei^a , C. Carrivale^{a,b} , D. Ciangottini^{a,b} , L. Della Penna^{a,b} , L. Fanò^{a,b} , V. Mariani^{a,b} , M. Menichelli^a , F. Moscatelli^{a,54} , A. Rossi^{a,b} , A. Santocchia^{a,b} , D. Spiga^a , T. Tedeschi^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Pisa^a, Università di Pisa^b, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa^c, Pisa, Italy; Università di Siena^d, Siena, Italy

C. Aimè^{a,b} , C.A. Alexe^{a,c} , P. Asenov^{a,b} , P. Azzurri^a , G. Bagliesi^a , R. Bhattacharya^a , L. Bianchini^{a,b} , T. Boccali^a , E. Bossini^a , D. Bruschini^{a,c} , L. Calligaris^{a,b} , R. Castaldi^a , F. Cattafesta^{a,c} , M.A. Ciocci^{a,d} , M. Cipriani^{a,b} , V. D'Amante^{a,d} , R. Dell'Orso^a , S. Donato^{a,b} , R. Forti^{a,b} , A. Giassi^a , F. Ligabue^{a,c} , A.C. Marini^{a,b} , D. Matos Figueiredo^a , A. Messineo^{a,b} , S. Mishra^a , V.K. Muraleedharan Nair Bindhu^{a,b} , S. Nandan^a , F. Palla^a , M. Riggirello^{a,c} , A. Rizzi^{a,b} , G. Rolandi^{a,c} , S. Roy Chowdhury^{a,55} , T. Sarkar^a , A. Scribano^a , P. Solanki^{a,b} , P. Spagnolo^a , F. Tenchini^{a,b} , R. Tenchini^a , G. Tonelli^{a,b} , N. Turini^{a,d} , F. Vaselli^{a,c} , A. Venturi^a , P.G. Verdini^a 

INFN Sezione di Roma^a, Sapienza Università di Roma^b, Roma, Italy

P. Akrap^{a,b} , C. Basile^{a,b} , S.C. Behera^a , F. Cavallari^a , L. Cunqueiro Mendez^{a,b} , F. De Ruggi^{a,b} , D. Del Re^{a,b} , E. Di Marco^a , M. Diemoz^a , F. Errico^a , L. Frosina^{a,b} , R. Gargiulo^{a,b} , B. Harikrishnan^{a,b} , F. Lombardi^{a,b} , E. Longo^{a,b} , L. Martikainen^{a,b} , J. Mijuskovic^{a,b} , G. Organtini^{a,b} , N. Palmeri^{a,b} , R. Paramatti^{a,b} , C. Quaranta^{a,b} , S. Rahatlou^{a,b} , C. Rovelli^a , F. Santanastasio^{a,b} , L. Soffi^a , V. Vladimirov^{a,b}

INFN Sezione di Torino^a, Università di Torino^b, Torino, Italy; Università del Piemonte Orientale^c, Novara, Italy

N. Amapane^{a,b} , R. Arcidiacono^{a,c} , S. Argiro^{a,b} , M. Arneodo^{a,c} , N. Bartosik^{a,c} , R. Bellan^{a,b} , A. Bellora^{a,b} , C. Biino^a , C. Borca^{a,b} , N. Cartiglia^a , M. Costa^{a,b} , R. Covarelli^{a,b} , N. Demaria^a , L. Finco^a , M. Grippa^{a,b} , B. Kiani^{a,b} , F. Legger^a , F. Luongo^{a,b} , C. Mariotti^a , S. Maselli^a , A. Mecca^{a,b} , L. Menzio^{a,b} , P. Meridiani^a , E. Migliore^{a,b} , M. Monteno^a , M.M. Obertino^{a,b} , G. Ortona^a , L. Pacher^{a,b} , N. Pastrone^a , M. Ruspa^{a,c} , F. Siviero^{a,b} , V. Sola^{a,b} , A. Solano^{a,b} , A. Staiano^a , C. Tarricone^{a,b} , D. Trocino^a , G. Umoret^{a,b} , E. Vlasov^{a,b} , R. White^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Trieste^a, Università di Trieste^b, Trieste, Italy

J. Babbar^{a,b} , S. Belforte^a , V. Candelise^{a,b} , M. Casarsa^a , F. Cossutti^a , K. De Leo^a , G. Della Ricca^{a,b} , R. Delli Gatti^{a,b} 

Kyungpook National University, Daegu, Korea

S. Dogra , J. Hong , J. Kim , T. Kim , D. Lee , H. Lee , J. Lee , S.W. Lee , C.S. Moon , Y.D. Oh , S. Sekmen , B. Tae , Y.C. Yang 

Department of Mathematics and Physics - GWNu, Gangneung, Korea

M.S. Kim 

Chonnam National University, Institute for Universe and Elementary Particles, Kwangju, Korea

G. Bak , P. Gwak , H. Kim , D.H. Moon , J. Seo 

Hanyang University, Seoul, Korea

E. Asilar , F. Carnevali , J. Choi⁵⁶ , T.J. Kim , Y. Ryou 

Korea University, Seoul, Korea

S. Ha , S. Han , B. Hong , K. Lee , K.S. Lee , S. Lee , J. Yoo 

Kyung Hee University, Department of Physics, Seoul, Korea

J. Goh , J. Shin , S. Yang 

Sejong University, Seoul, Korea

Y. Kang , H. S. Kim , Y. Kim , S. Lee

Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea

J. Almond, J.H. Bhyun, J. Choi , J. Choi, W. Jun , H. Kim , J. Kim , T. Kim, Y. Kim, Y.W. Kim , S. Ko , H. Lee , J. Lee , J. Lee , B.H. Oh , S.B. Oh , J. Shin , U.K. Yang, I. Yoon 

University of Seoul, Seoul, Korea

W. Jang , D.Y. Kang, D. Kim , S. Kim , B. Ko, J.S.H. Lee , Y. Lee , J.A. Merlin, I.C. Park , Y. Roh, I.J. Watson 

Yonsei University, Department of Physics, Seoul, Korea

G. Cho, K. Hwang , B. Kim , S. Kim, K. Lee , H.D. Yoo 

Sungkyunkwan University, Suwon, Korea

M. Choi , Y. Lee , I. Yu 

College of Engineering and Technology, American University of the Middle East (AUM), Dasman, Kuwait

T. Beyrouthy , Y. Gharbia 

Kuwait University - College of Science - Department of Physics, Safat, Kuwait

F. Alazemi 

Riga Technical University, Riga, Latvia

K. Dreimanis , O.M. Eberlins , A. Gaile , C. Munoz Diaz , D. Osite , G. Pikurs , R. Plese , A. Potrebko , M. Seidel , D. Sidiropoulos Kontos 

University of Latvia (LU), Riga, Latvia

N.R. Strautnieks 

Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

M. Ambrozas , A. Juodagalvis , S. Nargelas , A. Rinkevicius , G. Tamulaitis 

National Centre for Particle Physics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

I. Yusuff⁵⁷ , Z. Zolkapli

Universidad de Sonora (UNISON), Hermosillo, Mexico

J.F. Benitez , A. Castaneda Hernandez , A. Cota Rodriguez , L.E. Cuevas Picos, H.A. Encinas Acosta, L.G. Gallegos Maríñez, J.A. Murillo Quijada , A. Sehrawat , L. Valencia Palomo 

Centro de Investigacion y de Estudios Avanzados del IPN, Mexico City, Mexico

G. Ayala , H. Castilla-Valdez , H. Crotte Ledesma , R. Lopez-Fernandez , J. Mejia Guisao , R. Reyes-Almanza , A. Sánchez Hernández 

Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, Mexico

C. Oropeza Barrera , D.L. Ramirez Guadarrama, M. Ramírez García 

Benemerita Universidad Autonoma de Puebla, Puebla, Mexico

I. Bautista , F.E. Neri Huerta , I. Pedraza , H.A. Salazar Ibarguen , C. Uribe Estrada 

University of Montenegro, Podgorica, Montenegro

I. Bujanja , N. Raicevic 

University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

P.H. Butler 

National Centre for Physics, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan

A. Ahmad , M.I. Asghar , A. Awais , M.I.M. Awan, W.A. Khan 

AGH University of Krakow, Krakow, Poland

V. Avati, L. Forthomme , L. Grzanka , M. Malawski , K. Piotrkowski 

National Centre for Nuclear Research, Swierk, Poland

M. Bluj , M. Górski , M. Kazana , M. Szleper , P. Zalewski 

Institute of Experimental Physics, Faculty of Physics, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

K. Bunkowski , K. Doroba , A. Kalinowski , M. Konecki , J. Krolikowski , A. Muhammad 

Warsaw University of Technology, Warsaw, Poland

P. Fokow , K. Pozniak , W. Zabolotny 

Laboratório de Instrumentação e Física Experimental de Partículas, Lisboa, Portugal

M. Araujo , D. Bastos , C. Beirão Da Cruz E Silva , A. Boletti , M. Bozzo , T. Camporesi , G. Da Molin , P. Faccioli , M. Gallinaro , J. Hollar , N. Leonardo , G.B. Marozzo , A. Petrilli , M. Pisano , J. Seixas , J. Varela , J.W. Wulff 

Faculty of Physics, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

P. Adzic , L. Markovic , P. Milenovic , V. Milosevic 

VINCA Institute of Nuclear Sciences, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

D. Devetak , M. Dordevic , J. Milosevic , L. Nadderd , V. Rekovic, M. Stojanovic 

Centro de Investigaciones Energéticas Medioambientales y Tecnológicas (CIEMAT), Madrid, Spain

M. Alcalde Martinez , J. Alcaraz Maestre , Cristina F. Bedoya , J.A. Brochero Cifuentes , Oliver M. Carretero , M. Cepeda , M. Cerrada , N. Colino , J. Cuchillo Ortega, B. De La Cruz , A. Delgado Peris , A. Escalante Del Valle , D. Fernández Del Val , J.P. Fernández Ramos , J. Flix , M.C. Fouz , M. Gonzalez Hernandez , O. Gonzalez Lopez , S. Goy Lopez , J.M. Hernandez , M.I. Josa , J. Llorente Merino , C. Martin Perez , E. Martin Viscasillas , D. Moran , C. M. Morcillo Perez , R. Paz Herrera , C. Perez Dengra , A. Pérez-Calero Yzquierdo , J. Puerta Pelayo , I. Redondo , J. Vazquez Escobar 

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

J.F. de Trocóniz 

Universidad de Oviedo, Instituto Universitario de Ciencias y Tecnologías Espaciales de Asturias (ICTEA), Oviedo, Spain

B. Alvarez Gonzalez , J. Ayllon Torresano , A. Cardini , J. Cuevas , J. Del Riego Badas , D. Estrada Acevedo , J. Fernandez Menendez , S. Folgueras , I. Gonzalez Caballero , P. Leguina , M. Obeso Menendez , E. Palencia Cortezon , J. Prado Pico , A. Soto Rodríguez , C. Vico Villalba , P. Vischia 

Instituto de Física de Cantabria (IFCA), CSIC-Universidad de Cantabria, Santander, Spain

S. Blanco Fernández , I.J. Cabrillo , A. Calderon , J. Duarte Campderros , M. Fernandez , G. Gomez , C. Lasasa García , R. Lopez Ruiz , C. Martinez Rivero , P. Martinez Ruiz del Arbol , F. Matorras , P. Matorras Cuevas , E. Navarrete Ramos , J. Piedra Gomez , C. Quintana San Emeterio , L. Scodellaro , I. Vila , R. Vilar Cortabitarte , J.M. Vizan Garcia 

University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri LankaB. Kailasapathy⁵⁸ , D.D.C. Wickramarathna **University of Ruhuna, Department of Physics, Matara, Sri Lanka**W.G.D. Dharmaratna⁵⁹ , K. Liyanage , N. Perera **CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva, Switzerland**

D. Abbaneo , C. Amendola , R. Ardino , E. Auffray , J. Baechler , D. Barney ,
M. Bianco , A. Bocci , L. Borgonovi , C. Botta , A. Bragagnolo , C.E. Brown ,
C. Caillol , G. Cerminara , P. Connor , D. d'Enterria , A. Dabrowski , A. David ,
A. De Roeck , M.M. Defranchis , M. Deile , M. Dobson , W. Funk , A. Gaddi ,
S. Giani , D. Gigi , K. Gill , F. Glege , M. Glowacki , A. Gruber , J. Hegeman ,
J.K. Heikkilä , B. Huber , V. Innocente , T. James , P. Janot , O. Kaluzinska ,
O. Karacheban²⁷ , G. Karathanasis , L. Lanteri , S. Laurila , P. Lecoq , C. Lourenço ,
A.-M. Lyon , M. Magherini , L. Malgeri , M. Mannelli , A. Mehta , F. Meijers ,
S. Mersi , E. Meschi , M. Migliorini , F. Monti , F. Moortgat , M. Mulders ,
M. Musich , I. Neutelings , S. Orfanelli , F. Pantaleo , M. Pari , G. Petrucciani ,
A. Pfeiffer , M. Pierini , M. Pitt , H. Qu , D. Rabady , B. Ribeiro Lopes , F. Riti ,
P. Rosado , M. Rovere , H. Sakulin , R. Salvatico , S. Sanchez Cruz , S. Scarfi ,
M. Selvaggi , A. Sharma , K. Shchelina , P. Silva , P. Sphicas⁶⁰ , A.G. Stahl Leiton ,
A. Steen , S. Summers , D. Treille , P. Tropea , E. Vernazza , J. Wanczyk⁶¹ , J. Wang ,
S. Wuchterl , M. Zarucki , P. Zehetner , P. Zejdl , G. Zevi Della Porta 

PSI Center for Neutron and Muon Sciences, Villigen, Switzerland

T. Bevilacqua⁶² , L. Caminada⁶² , W. Erdmann , R. Horisberger , Q. Ingram ,
H.C. Kaestli , D. Kotlinski , C. Lange , U. Langenegger , M. Missiroli⁶² ,
L. Noehte⁶² , T. Rohe , A. Samalan 

ETH Zurich - Institute for Particle Physics and Astrophysics (IPA), Zurich, Switzerland

T.K. Aarrestad , M. Backhaus , G. Bonomelli , C. Cazzaniga , K. Datta ,
P. De Bryas , Dexmiers , D'archiacchiac⁶¹ , A. De Cosa , G. Dissertori , M. Dittmar ,
M. Donegà , F. Eble , K. Gedia , F. Glessgen , C. Grab , N. Härringer , T.G. Harte ,
W. Lustermann , M. Malucchi , R.A. Manzoni , M. Marchegiani , L. Marchese ,
A. Mascellani⁶¹ , F. Nessi-Tedaldi , F. Pauss , V. Perovic , B. Ristic , R. Seidita ,
J. Steggemann⁶¹ , A. Tarabini , D. Valsecchi , R. Wallny 

Universität Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland

C. Amsler⁶³ , P. Bärttschi , F. Bilandzija , M.F. Canelli , G. Celotto , K. Cormier ,
M. Huwiler , W. Jin , A. Jofrehei , B. Kilminster , T.H. Kwok , S. Leontsinis ,
V. Lukashenko , A. Macchiolo , F. Meng , J. Motta , A. Reimers , P. Robmann ,
M. Senger , E. Shokr , F. Stäger , R. Tramontano 

National Central University, Chung-Li, TaiwanD. Bhowmik , C.M. Kuo , P.K. Rout , S. Taj , P.C. Tiwari³⁸ **National Taiwan University (NTU), Taipei, Taiwan**

L. Ceard , K.F. Chen , Z.g. Chen , A. De Iorio , W.-S. Hou , T.h. Hsu , Y.w. Kao ,
S. Karmakar , G. Kole , Y.y. Li , R.-S. Lu , E. Paganis , X.f. Su , J. Thomas-Wilsker ,
L.s. Tsai , D. Tsionou , H.y. Wu , E. Yazgan 

High Energy Physics Research Unit, Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, ThailandC. Asawatangtrakuldee , N. Srimanobhas 

Tunis El Manar University, Tunis, TunisiaY. Maghrbi **Çukurova University, Physics Department, Science and Art Faculty, Adana, Turkey**D. Agyel , F. Dolek , I. Dumanoglu⁶⁴ , Y. Guler⁶⁵ , E. Gurpinar Guler⁶⁵ , C. Isik , O. Kara , A. Kayis Topaksu , Y. Komurcu , G. Onengut , K. Ozdemir⁶⁶ , B. Tali⁶⁷ , U.G. Tok , E. Uslan , I.S. Zorbakir **Middle East Technical University, Physics Department, Ankara, Turkey**M. Yalvac⁶⁸ **Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey**B. Akgun , I.O. Atakisi⁶⁹ , E. Gülmez , M. Kaya⁷⁰ , O. Kaya⁷¹ , M.A. Sarkisla⁷², S. Tekten⁷³ **Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey**A. Cakir , K. Cankocak^{64,74} , S. Sen⁷⁵ **Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey**O. Aydilek⁷⁶ , B. Haciasahinoglu , I. Hos⁷⁷ , B. Kaynak , S. Ozkorucuklu , O. Potok , H. Sert , C. Simsek , C. Zorbilmez **Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey**S. Cerci , B. Isildak⁷⁸ , D. Sunar Cerci , T. Yetkin²¹ **Institute for Scintillation Materials of National Academy of Science of Ukraine, Kharkiv, Ukraine**A. Boyaryntsev , O. Dadazhanova, B. Grynyov **National Science Centre, Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology, Kharkiv, Ukraine**L. Levchuk **University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom**J.J. Brooke , A. Bundock , F. Bury , E. Clement , D. Cussans , D. Dharmender, H. Flacher , J. Goldstein , H.F. Heath , M.-L. Holmberg , L. Kreczko , S. Paramesvaran , L. Robertshaw, M.S. Sanjrani, J. Segal, V.J. Smith **Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Didcot, United Kingdom**A.H. Ball, K.W. Bell , A. Belyaev⁷⁹ , C. Brew , R.M. Brown , D.J.A. Cockerill , C. Cooke , A. Elliot , K.V. Ellis, J. Gajownik , K. Harder , S. Harper , J. Linacre , K. Manolopoulos, M. Moallemi , D.M. Newbold , E. Olaiya , D. Petyt , T. Reis , A.R. Sahasransu , G. Salvi , T. Schuh, C.H. Shepherd-Themistocleous , I.R. Tomalin , K.C. Whalen , T. Williams **Imperial College, London, United Kingdom**I. Andreou , R. Bainbridge , P. Bloch , O. Buchmuller, C.A. Carrillo Montoya , D. Colling , J.S. Dancu, I. Das , P. Dauncey , G. Davies , M. Della Negra , S. Fayer, G. Fedi , G. Hall , H.R. Hoorani , A. Howard, G. Iles , C.R. Knight , P. Krueper , J. Langford , K.H. Law , J. León Holgado , E. Leutgeb , L. Lyons , A.-M. Magnan , B. Maier , S. Mallios, A. Mastronikolis , M. Mieskolainen , J. Nash⁸⁰ , M. Pesaresi , P.B. Pradeep , B.C. Radburn-Smith , A. Richards, A. Rose , L. Russell , K. Savva , C. Seez , R. Shukla , A. Tapper , K. Uchida , G.P. Uttley , T. Virdee²⁹ , M. Vojinovic , N. Wardle , D. Winterbottom **Brunel University, Uxbridge, United Kingdom**

J.E. Cole , A. Khan, P. Kyberd , I.D. Reid 

Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA

S. Abdullin , A. Brinkerhoff , E. Collins , M.R. Darwish , J. Dittmann , K. Hatakeyama , V. Hegde , J. Hiltbrand , B. McMaster , J. Samudio , S. Sawant , C. Sutantawibul , J. Wilson 

Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

J.M. Hogan⁸¹ 

Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, USA

R. Bartek , A. Dominguez , S. Raj , A.E. Simsek , S.S. Yu 

The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA

B. Bam , A. Buchot Perraguin , S. Campbell, R. Chudasama , S.I. Cooper , C. Crovella , G. Fidalgo , S.V. Gleyzer , A. Khukhunaishvili , K. Matchev , E. Pearson, C.U. Perez , P. Rumerio⁸² , E. Usai , R. Yi 

Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

S. Cholak , G. De Castro, Z. Demiragli , C. Erice , C. Fangmeier , C. Fernandez Madrazo , E. Fontanesi , J. Fulcher , F. Golf , S. Jeon , J. O'Cain, I. Reed , J. Rohlf , K. Salyer , D. Sperka , D. Spitzbart , I. Suarez , A. Tsatsos , E. Wurtz, A.G. Zecchinelli 

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA

G. Barone , G. Benelli , D. Cutts , S. Ellis , L. Gouskos , M. Hadley , U. Heintz , K.W. Ho , T. Kwon , G. Landsberg , K.T. Lau , J. Luo , S. Mondal , J. Roloff, T. Russell , S. Sagir⁸³ , X. Shen , M. Stamenkovic , N. Venkatasubramanian 

University of California, Davis, Davis, California, USA

S. Abbott , B. Barton , R. Breedon , H. Cai , M. Calderon De La Barca Sanchez , M. Chertok , M. Citron , J. Conway , P.T. Cox , R. Erbacher , O. Kukral , G. Mocellin , S. Ostrom , W. Wei , S. Yoo 

University of California, Los Angeles, California, USA

K. Adamidis, M. Bachtis , D. Campos, R. Cousins , A. Datta , G. Flores Avila , J. Hauser , M. Ignatenko , M.A. Iqbal , T. Lam , Y.f. Lo , E. Manca , A. Nunez Del Prado , D. Saltzberg , V. Valuev 

University of California, Riverside, Riverside, California, USA

R. Clare , J.W. Gary , G. Hanson 

University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California, USA

A. Aportela , A. Arora , J.G. Branson , S. Cittolin , S. Cooperstein , D. Diaz , J. Duarte , L. Giannini , Y. Gu, J. Guiang , V. Krutelyov , R. Lee , J. Letts , H. Li, M. Masciovecchio , F. Mokhtar , S. Mukherjee , M. Pieri , D. Primosch, M. Quinnan , V. Sharma , M. Tadel , E. Vourliotis , F. Würthwein , A. Yagil , Z. Zhao 

University of California, Santa Barbara - Department of Physics, Santa Barbara, California, USA

A. Barzdukas , L. Brennan , C. Campagnari , S. Carron Montero⁸⁴ , K. Downham , C. Grieco , M.M. Hussain, J. Incandela , J. Kim , M.W.K. Lai, A.J. Li , P. Masterson , J. Richman , S.N. Santpur , U. Sarica , R. Schmitz , F. Setti , J. Sheplock , D. Stuart , T.Á. Vámi , X. Yan , D. Zhang 

California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, USA

A. Albert , S. Bhattacharya , A. Bornheim , O. Cerri, R. Kansal , J. Mao , H.B. Newman , G. Reales Gutiérrez, T. Sievert, M. Spiropulu , J.R. Vlimant , R.A. Wynne , S. Xie 

Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

J. Alison , S. An , M. Cremonesi, V. Dutta , E.Y. Ertorer , T. Ferguson , T.A. Gómez Espinosa , A. Harilal , A. Kallil Tharayil, M. Kanemura, C. Liu , P. Meiring , T. Mudholkar , S. Murthy , P. Palit , K. Park , M. Paulini , A. Roberts , A. Sanchez , W. Terrill 

University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, Colorado, USA

J.P. Cumalat , W.T. Ford , A. Hart , A. Hassani , S. Kwan , J. Pearkes , C. Savard , N. Schonbeck , K. Stenson , K.A. Ulmer , S.R. Wagner , N. Zipper , D. Zuolo 

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA

J. Alexander , X. Chen , D.J. Cranshaw , J. Dickinson , J. Fan , X. Fan , J. Grassi , S. Hogan , P. Kotamnives , J. Monroy , G. Niendorf , M. Oshiro , J.R. Patterson , M. Reid , A. Ryd , J. Thom , P. Wittich , R. Zou , L. Zygala 

Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Batavia, Illinois, USA

M. Albrow , M. Alyari , O. Amram , G. Apollinari , A. Apresyan , L.A.T. Bauerdick , D. Berry , J. Berryhill , P.C. Bhat , K. Burkett , J.N. Butler , A. Canepa , G.B. Cerati , H.W.K. Cheung , F. Chlebana , C. Cosby , G. Cummings , I. Dutta , V.D. Elvira , J. Freeman , A. Gandrakota , Z. Gecse , L. Gray , D. Green, A. Grummer , S. Grünendahl , D. Guerrero , O. Gutsche , R.M. Harris , T.C. Herwig , J. Hirschauer , B. Jayatilaka , S. Jindariani , M. Johnson , U. Joshi , T. Klijnsma , B. Klima , K.H.M. Kwok , S. Lammel , C. Lee , D. Lincoln , R. Lipton , T. Liu , K. Maeshima , D. Mason , P. McBride , P. Merkel , S. Mrenna , S. Nahn , J. Ngadiuba , D. Noonan , S. Norberg, V. Papadimitriou , N. Pastika , K. Pedro , C. Pena⁸⁵ , C.E. Perez Lara , F. Ravera , A. Reinsvold Hall⁸⁶ , L. Ristori , M. Safdari , E. Sexton-Kennedy , N. Smith , A. Soha , L. Spiegel , S. Stoynev , J. Strait , L. Taylor , S. Tkaczyk , N.V. Tran , L. Uplegger , E.W. Vaandering , C. Wang , I. Zoi 

University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA

C. Aruta , P. Avery , D. Bourilkov , P. Chang , V. Cherepanov , R.D. Field, C. Huh , E. Koenig , M. Kolosova , J. Konigsberg , A. Korytov , N. Menendez , G. Mitselmakher , K. Mohrman , A. Muthirakalayil Madhu , N. Rawal , S. Rosenzweig , V. Sulimov , Y. Takahashi , J. Wang 

Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, USA

T. Adams , A. Al Kadhimi , A. Askew , S. Bower , R. Hashmi , R.S. Kim , T. Kolberg , G. Martinez , M. Mazza , H. Prosper , P.R. Prova, M. Wulansatiti , R. Yohay 

Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Florida, USA

B. Alsufyani , S. Butalla , S. Das , M. Hohlmann , M. Lavinsky, E. Yanes

University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

M.R. Adams , N. Barnett, A. Baty , C. Bennett , R. Cavanaugh , R. Escobar Franco , O. Evdokimov , C.E. Gerber , H. Gupta , M. Hawksworth, A. Hingrajiya, D.J. Hofman , J.h. Lee , D. S. Lemos , C. Mills , S. Nanda , G. Nigmatkulov , B. Ozek , T. Phan, D. Pilipovic , R. Pradhan , E. Prifti, P. Roy, T. Roy , N. Singh, M.B. Tonjes , N. Varelas , M.A. Wadud , J. Yoo 

The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA

M. Alhusseini , D. Blend , K. Dilsiz⁸⁷ , O.K. Köseyan , A. Mestvirishvili⁸⁸ , O. Neogi, H. Ogul⁸⁹ , Y. Onel , A. Penzo , C. Snyder, E. Tiras⁹⁰ 

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

B. Blumenfeld , J. Davis , A.V. Gritsan , L. Kang , S. Kyriacou , P. Maksimovic , M. Roguljic , S. Sekhar , M.V. Srivastav , M. Swartz 

The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA

A. Abreu , L.F. Alcerro Alcerro , J. Anguiano , S. Arteaga Escatel , P. Baringer , A. Bean , Z. Flowers , D. Grove , J. King , G. Krintiras , M. Lazarovits , C. Le Mahieu , J. Marquez , M. Murray , M. Nickel , S. Popescu⁹¹ , C. Rogan , C. Royon , S. Rudrabhatla , S. Sanders , C. Smith , G. Wilson 

Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, USA

B. Allmond , R. Gujju Gurunadha , N. Islam, A. Ivanov , K. Kaadze , Y. Maravin , J. Natoli , D. Roy , G. Sorrentino 

University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA

A. Baden , A. Belloni , J. Bistany-riebman, S.C. Eno , N.J. Hadley , S. Jabeen , R.G. Kellogg , T. Koeth , B. Kronheim, S. Lascio , P. Major , A.C. Mignerey , C. Palmer , C. Papageorgakis , M.M. Paranjpe, E. Popova⁹² , A. Shevelev , L. Zhang 

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

C. Baldenegro Barrera , J. Bendavid , H. Bossi , S. Bright-Thonney , I.A. Cali , Y.c. Chen , P.c. Chou , M. D'Alfonso , J. Eysermans , C. Freer , G. Gomez-Ceballos , M. Goncharov, G. Grosso , P. Harris, D. Hoang , G.M. Innocenti , D. Kovalskiy , J. Krupa , L. Lavezzo , Y.-J. Lee , K. Long , C. McGinn , A. Novak , M.I. Park , C. Paus , C. Reissel , C. Roland , G. Roland , S. Rothman , T.a. Sheng , G.S.F. Stephans , D. Walter , Z. Wang , B. Wyslouch , T. J. Yang 

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

B. Crossman , W.J. Jackson, C. Kapsiak , M. Krohn , D. Mahon , J. Mans , B. Marzocchi , R. Rusack , O. Sancar , R. Saradhy , N. Strobbe 

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

K. Bloom , D.R. Claes , G. Haza , J. Hossain , C. Joo , I. Kravchenko , A. Rohilla , J.E. Siado , W. Tabb , A. Vagnerini , A. Wightman , F. Yan 

State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York, USA

H. Bandyopadhyay , L. Hay , H.w. Hsia , I. Iashvili , A. Kalogeropoulos , A. Kharchilava , A. Mandal , M. Morris , D. Nguyen , S. Rappoccio , H. Rejeb Sfar, A. Williams , P. Young , D. Yu 

Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

G. Alverson , E. Barberis , J. Bonilla , B. Bylsma, M. Campana , J. Dervan , Y. Haddad , Y. Han , I. Israr , A. Krishna , M. Lu , N. Manganelli , R. McCarthy , D.M. Morse , T. Orimoto , A. Parker , L. Skinnari , C.S. Thoreson , E. Tsai , D. Wood 

Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA

S. Dittmer , K.A. Hahn , Y. Liu , M. McGinnis , Y. Miao , D.G. Monk , M.H. Schmitt , A. Taliencio , M. Velasco , J. Wang 

University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

G. Agarwal , R. Band , R. Bucci, S. Castells , A. Das , A. Ehnis, R. Goldouzian , M. Hildreth , K. Hurtado Anampa , T. Ivanov , C. Jessop , A. Karneyeu , K. Lannon , J. Lawrence , N. Loukas , L. Lutton , J. Mariano , N. Marinelli, I. Mcalister, T. McCauley , C. Mcgrady , C. Moore , Y. Musienko²³ , H. Nelson , M. Osherson , A. Piccinelli , R. Ruchti , A. Townsend , Y. Wan, M. Wayne , H. Yockey

The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

A. Basnet , M. Carrigan , R. De Los Santos , L.S. Durkin , C. Hill , M. Joyce , M. Nunez Ornelas , D.A. Wenzl, B.L. Winer , B. R. Yates 

Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA

H. Bouchamaoui , K. Coldham, P. Das , G. Dezoort , P. Elmer , A. Frankenthal , M. Galli , B. Greenberg , N. Haubrich , K. Kennedy, G. Kopp , Y. Lai , D. Lange , A. Loeliger , D. Marlow , I. Ojalvo , J. Olsen , F. Simpson , D. Stickland , C. Tully 

University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, USA

S. Malik , R. Sharma 

Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA

A.S. Bakshi , S. Chandra , R. Chawla , A. Gu , L. Gutay, M. Jones , A.W. Jung , D. Kondratyev , M. Liu , M. Matthewman, G. Negro , N. Neumeister , G. Paspalaki , S. Piperov , J.F. Schulte , F. Wang , A. Wildridge , W. Xie , Y. Yao , Y. Zhong 

Purdue University Northwest, Hammond, Indiana, USA

N. Parashar , A. Pathak , E. Shumka 

Rice University, Houston, Texas, USA

D. Acosta , A. Agrawal , C. Arbour , T. Carnahan , K.M. Ecklund , P.J. Fernández Manteca , S. Freed, P. Gardner, F.J.M. Geurts , T. Huang , I. Krommydas , N. Lewis, W. Li , J. Lin , O. Miguel Colin , B.P. Padley , R. Redjimi , J. Rotter , E. Yigitbasi , Y. Zhang 

University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, USA

O. Bessidskaia Bylund, A. Bodek , P. de Barbaro[†] , R. Demina , J.L. Dulemba , A. Garcia-Bellido , H.S. Hare , O. Hindrichs , N. Parmar , P. Parygin⁹² , H. Seo , R. Taus 

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Piscataway, New Jersey, USA

B. Chiarito, J.P. Chou , S.V. Clark , S. Donnelly, D. Gadkari , Y. Gershtein , E. Halkiadakis , M. Heindl , C. Houghton , D. Jaroslowski , S. Konstantinou , I. Laflotte , A. Lath , J. Martins , B. Rand , J. Reichert , P. Saha , S. Salur , S. Schnetzer, S. Somalwar , R. Stone , S.A. Thayil , S. Thomas, J. Vora 

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

D. Ally , A.G. Delannoy , S. Fiorendi , J. Harris, S. Higginbotham , T. Holmes , A.R. Kanuganti , N. Karunarathna , J. Lawless, L. Lee , E. Nibigira , B. Skipworth, S. Spanier 

Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

D. Aebi , M. Ahmad , T. Akhter , K. Androsov , A. Bolshov, O. Bouhali⁹³ , R. Eusebi , P. Flanagan , J. Gilmore , Y. Guo, T. Kamon , S. Luo , R. Mueller , A. Safonov 

Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, USA

N. Akchurin , J. Damgov , Y. Feng , N. Gogate , Y. Kazhykarim, K. Lamichhane , S.W. Lee , C. Madrid , A. Mankel , T. Peltola , I. Volobouev 

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA

E. Appelt , Y. Chen , S. Greene, A. Gurrola , W. Johns , R. Kunnawalkam Elayavalli , A. Melo , D. Rathjens , F. Romeo , P. Sheldon , S. Tuo , J. Velkovska , J. Viinikainen , J. Zhang

University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

B. Cardwell , H. Chung , B. Cox , J. Hakala , R. Hirosky , M. Jose, A. Ledovskoy , C. Mantilla , C. Neu , C. Ramón Álvarez 

Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA

S. Bhattacharya , P.E. Karchin 

University of Wisconsin - Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

A. Aravind , S. Banerjee , K. Black , T. Bose , E. Chavez , S. Dasu , P. Everaerts , C. Galloni, H. He , M. Herndon , A. Herve , C.K. Koraka , S. Lomte , R. Loveless , A. Mallampalli , A. Mohammadi , S. Mondal, T. Nelson, G. Parida , L. Pétré , D. Pinna , A. Savin, V. Shang , V. Sharma , W.H. Smith , D. Teague, H.F. Tsoi , W. Vetens , A. Warden 

Authors affiliated with an international laboratory covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN

S. Afanasiev , V. Alexakhin , Yu. Andreev , T. Aushev , D. Budkouski , R. Chistov⁹⁴ , M. Danilov⁹⁴ , T. Dimova⁹⁴ , A. Ershov⁹⁴ , S. Gninenko , I. Gorbunov , A. Gribushin⁹⁴ , A. Kamenev , V. Karjavine , M. Kirsanov , V. Klyukhin⁹⁴ , O. Kodolova^{95,92} , V. Korenkov , A. Kozyrev⁹⁴ , N. Krasnikov , A. Lanev , A. Malakhov , V. Matveev⁹⁴ , A. Nikitenko^{96,95} , V. Palichik , V. Perelygin , S. Petrushanko⁹⁴ , S. Polikarpov⁹⁴ , O. Radchenko⁹⁴ , M. Savina , V. Shalaev , S. Shmatov , S. Shulha , Y. Skovpen⁹⁴ , V. Smirnov , O. Teryaev , I. Tlisova⁹⁴ , A. Toropin , N. Voytishin , B.S. Yuldashev^{†97}, A. Zarubin , I. Zhizhin 

Authors affiliated with an institute formerly covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN

E. Boos , V. Bunichev , M. Dubinin⁸⁵ , V. Savrin , A. Snigirev , L. Dudko , K. Ivanov , V. Kim²³ , V. Murzin , V. Oreshkin , D. Sosnov 

†: Deceased

¹Also at Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia

²Also at TU Wien, Vienna, Austria

³Also at Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

⁴Also at Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

⁵Also at FACAMP - Faculdades de Campinas, Sao Paulo, Brazil

⁶Also at Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, Brazil

⁷Also at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil

⁸Also at The University of the State of Amazonas, Manaus, Brazil

⁹Also at University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

¹⁰Also at China Center of Advanced Science and Technology, Beijing, China

¹¹Also at University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

¹²Now at Henan Normal University, Xinxiang, China

¹³Also at University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

¹⁴Now at The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA

¹⁵Also at Center for High Energy Physics, Peking University, Beijing, China

¹⁶Also at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt

¹⁷Also at Suez University, Suez, Egypt

- ¹⁸Now at British University in Egypt, Cairo, Egypt
- ¹⁹Also at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA
- ²⁰Also at Université de Haute Alsace, Mulhouse, France
- ²¹Also at Istinye University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ²²Also at Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia
- ²³Also at an institute formerly covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN
- ²⁴Also at University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany
- ²⁵Also at RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut A, Aachen, Germany
- ²⁶Also at Bergische University Wuppertal (BUW), Wuppertal, Germany
- ²⁷Also at Brandenburg University of Technology, Cottbus, Germany
- ²⁸Also at Forschungszentrum Jülich, Juelich, Germany
- ²⁹Also at CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva, Switzerland
- ³⁰Also at HUN-REN ATOMKI - Institute of Nuclear Research, Debrecen, Hungary
- ³¹Now at Universitatea Babes-Bolyai - Facultatea de Fizica, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
- ³²Also at MTA-ELTE Lendület CMS Particle and Nuclear Physics Group, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
- ³³Also at HUN-REN Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest, Hungary
- ³⁴Also at Physics Department, Faculty of Science, Assiut University, Assiut, Egypt
- ³⁵Also at The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA
- ³⁶Also at Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, India
- ³⁷Also at University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India
- ³⁸Also at Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, India
- ³⁹Also at University of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India
- ⁴⁰Also at IIT Bhubaneswar, Bhubaneswar, India
- ⁴¹Also at Institute of Physics, Bhubaneswar, India
- ⁴²Also at Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron, Hamburg, Germany
- ⁴³Also at Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran
- ⁴⁴Also at Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran
- ⁴⁵Also at Department of Physics, University of Science and Technology of Mazandaran, Behshahr, Iran
- ⁴⁶Also at Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, Arak University, ARAK, Iran
- ⁴⁷Also at Helwan University, Cairo, Egypt
- ⁴⁸Also at Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development, Bologna, Italy
- ⁴⁹Also at Centro Siciliano di Fisica Nucleare e di Struttura Della Materia, Catania, Italy
- ⁵⁰Also at Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi, Roma, Italy
- ⁵¹Also at Scuola Superiore Meridionale, Università di Napoli 'Federico II', Napoli, Italy
- ⁵²Also at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Batavia, Illinois, USA
- ⁵³Also at Lulea University of Technology, Lulea, Sweden
- ⁵⁴Also at Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche - Istituto Officina dei Materiali, Perugia, Italy
- ⁵⁵Also at UPES - University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun, India
- ⁵⁶Also at Institut de Physique des 2 Infinis de Lyon (IP2I), Villeurbanne, France
- ⁵⁷Also at Department of Applied Physics, Faculty of Science and Technology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia
- ⁵⁸Also at Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka, Nilaveli, Sri Lanka
- ⁵⁹Also at Saegis Campus, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka
- ⁶⁰Also at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece
- ⁶¹Also at Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
- ⁶²Also at Universität Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland

-
- ⁶³Also at Stefan Meyer Institute for Subatomic Physics, Vienna, Austria
- ⁶⁴Also at Near East University, Research Center of Experimental Health Science, Mersin, Turkey
- ⁶⁵Also at Konya Technical University, Konya, Turkey
- ⁶⁶Also at Izmir Bakircay University, Izmir, Turkey
- ⁶⁷Also at Adiyaman University, Adiyaman, Turkey
- ⁶⁸Also at Bozok Universitetesi Rektörlüğü, Yozgat, Turkey
- ⁶⁹Also at Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷⁰Also at Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷¹Also at Milli Savunma University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷²Also at Informatics and Information Security Research Center, Gebze/Kocaeli, Turkey
- ⁷³Also at Kafkas University, Kars, Turkey
- ⁷⁴Now at Istanbul Okan University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷⁵Also at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey
- ⁷⁶Also at Erzincan Binali Yildirim University, Erzincan, Turkey
- ⁷⁷Also at Istanbul University - Cerrahpasa, Faculty of Engineering, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷⁸Also at Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷⁹Also at School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom
- ⁸⁰Also at Monash University, Faculty of Science, Clayton, Australia
- ⁸¹Also at Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA
- ⁸²Also at Università di Torino, Torino, Italy
- ⁸³Also at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Karaman, Turkey
- ⁸⁴Also at California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, California, USA
- ⁸⁵Also at California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, USA
- ⁸⁶Also at United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, USA
- ⁸⁷Also at Bingol University, Bingol, Turkey
- ⁸⁸Also at Georgian Technical University, Tbilisi, Georgia
- ⁸⁹Also at Sinop University, Sinop, Turkey
- ⁹⁰Also at Erciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey
- ⁹¹Also at Horia Hulubei National Institute of Physics and Nuclear Engineering (IFIN-HH), Bucharest, Romania
- ⁹²Now at another institute formerly covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN
- ⁹³Also at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU), Doha, Qatar
- ⁹⁴Also at another institute formerly covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN
- ⁹⁵Also at Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan, Armenia
- ⁹⁶Also at Imperial College, London, United Kingdom
- ⁹⁷Also at Institute of Nuclear Physics of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, Tashkent, Uzbekistan